



## DEATH SENDS FOR THE DOCTOR

UPPER Square is the last stronghold of snobbery in Abbot's Caldicott, a dying little metropolis in East Anglia, and the remnants of queer old families reside there. Doctor Beharrell, a prominent physician, is found murdered in a secret room in his home at Bank House, in the square, and Superintendent Littlejohn, warned before it has been discovered that the crime has been committed, goes to investigate. Before he leaves Caldicott with the case solved, a lot of strange past history comes to light and the repressions and inbreeding of the upper ten of Caldicott produce some queer twists of hatred and madness.

Littlejohn, whom David Holloway calls 'the most courteous of all fictional detectives,' finds all his good manners are needed in dealing with this strange affair among a crowd of characters who live in an atmosphere of days that are gone.

*GEORGE BELLAIRS has also written*

\*

LITTLEJOHN ON LEAVE  
FOUR UNFAITHFUL SERVANTS  
DEATH OF A BUSYBODY  
DEAD SHALL BE RAISED  
TURMOIL IN ZION  
MURDER OF A QUACK  
HE'D RATHER BE DEAD  
CALAMITY AT HARWOOD  
DEATH IN THE NIGHT WATCHES  
CRIME AT HALFPENNY BRIDGE  
THE CASE OF THE SCARED RABBITS  
DEATH ON THE LAST TRAIN  
OUTRAGE ON GALLOWS HILL  
THE CASE OF THE SEVEN WHISTLERS  
THE CASE OF THE FAMISHED PARSON  
THE CASE OF THE DEMENTED SPIV  
THE CASE OF THE HEADLESS JESUIT  
DEAD MARCH FOR PENELOPE BLOW  
DEATH IN DARK GLASSES  
CRIME IN LEPERS' HOLLOW  
A KNIFE FOR HARRY DODD  
HALF-MAST FOR THE DEEMSTER  
CORPSES IN ENDERBY  
THE CURSING STONES MURDER  
DEATH IN ROOM FIVE  
DEATH TREADS SOFTLY  
DEATH DROPS THE PILOT  
DEATH IN HIGH PROVENCE

DEATH SENDS  
FOR  
THE DOCTOR

BY

GEORGE BELLAIRS

THE THRILLER BOOK CLUB  
121 CHARING CROSS ROAD  
LONDON W.C.2

*First published 1957*

Durga Sah Municipal Library,  
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Class No. .... 823 .....

Book No. ... B 432 D .....

Received on . 1st. 6. 1962....

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
BRISTOL TYPESETTING COMPANY  
STOKES GROFT - BRISTOL

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*This is a work of fiction, the characters are entirely  
imaginary, and no reference is made or intended to any  
person, alive or dead.*

TO THE MEMORY OF  
HIS HONOUR JAMES ARTHUR CAIN,  
Her Majesty's Second Deemster in the Isle of Man

May fashion ne'er repeal  
That self-respect, those manners pure and leal !  
His countrymen, I charge you never stain them :  
But, as you love your Island's noblest weal,  
Guard and maintain them.

T. E. BROWN.

## I

## THE PUZZLE OF ABBOT'S CALDICOTT

*A murder was committed at Abbot's Caldicott last Friday.*

SUPERINTENDENT Littlejohn turned over the dirty piece of paper between his finger and thumb. The message was pencilled in uneven capitals on a scrap roughly torn from the top of what might have been a magazine. The envelope was just as disreputable. Cheap, soiled, properly stamped, with the cancellation a mere smudge—the kind of angry, inky mess they make in the sorting-office when the stamp hasn't been properly spoiled at the first go. The address was in illiterate printing as well.

SUPT. LITTLEJOHN  
SCOTLAND YARD  
LONDON

Whoever had written it was right up to date. Littlejohn had only been promoted three days and now he was sitting at his desk in front of a litter of congratulations from his colleagues and friends. He reached for the reference book.

ABBOT'S CALDICOTT. (Soke of Dofford, Fenshire.) Pop. 3400. London 104; Abbot's Dofford 4; Norwich 31; Cold Staunton 4; Peterborough 34; Kegworth Ducis 7 . . . .  
Lic. Hours. w.d. 11-3, 5-10; S. 12-2, 7-10 . . . .

"Give me the Soke of Dofford police, please . . ." At the other end of the line, the Chief Constable of the

Soke listened, answered briefly, turned purple, and then hung up.

"Scotland Yard have had one of those blasted things as well. What the hell does Plumtree think he's doin'? Get him on the phone right away."

Sergeant Plumtree was drinking a cup of tea and smoking a cigarette when the telephone rang in his little police station in Upper Square, Caldicott. Before picking up the instrument, he docked his fag, pushed away his cup, sprang to attention, smoothed his tunic, and looked guilty, as though the caller were about to materialise and denounce him.

"Yes . . . Caldicott police . . ."

Plumtree was a large, fat, pneumatic-looking officer who, with the help of six constables, kept order in Caldicott. He had a bald, orange-shaped head, a large ginger moustache, a bulbous nose, a nice wife and four children, and he had been awarded a medal for gallantry in air raids during the war. Now he didn't look very brave.

"But I've combed the town, sir. I assure you nobody's been inured. No, sir; I 'aven't called the roll, but if there'd been a murder, I'd have been the first to know . . . Somebody would 'ave reported it."

Plumtree spoke in the posh voice he used when addressing his superiors and smacked the top of his head as though punishing or stimulating his brain for slowness. He always knew exactly what to say and how to deal with a situation after the event. He called it *afterwit*, and it was his great cross in life.

"Yes, sir. The only person reported to us as out of town is Dr. Beharrell. He's been visitin' his mother on her death-bed and his assistant's doin' the work . . ."

There were loud and angry noises from the telephone.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you asked and I thought . . . Very good, sir. I'm doin' my best . . . I said, I'm doin' my best, sir . . ."

He hung up the instrument and then, in a sudden gust of rage, apostrophised it and went to the extent of shaking his huge fist at it.

"Unreasonable old devil, that's wot you are! Silly old

fool! Clever Dick! Johnny Know-all! Slow, am I? I'll ruddy-well show you. 'ubbard! *Hubbard*!"

The last word sounded all over the square and there was a response of heavy feet to it. A young, thin, aquiline and melancholy constable wearing a startled expression appeared at the door.

"You've taken your time over it, 'ubbard! Why can't you come when you're called?"

Hubbard's lips moved as Plumtree's afterwit began to function.

"I'd got my boots off . . ."

"Don't chat back at me. Get your 'elmet on."

The constable made a measured exit and returned wearing his official headgear. He looked mildly at the sergeant, waiting for an explanation or another rocket.

"That was the Chief ringin' up. It seems he's just 'eard from Scotland Yard, and they've also got one of those bloomin' bits of paper saying there was a murder 'ere last Friday . . ."

"You don't say, sergeant!"

"And wot might that remark mean? That what I say isn't true? Or that you've gone deaf all of a sudden? Pull yourself together, 'ubbard, and for Pete's sake, don't stand there with your mouth open. The Chief's 'oppin' mad and wants immediate results."

They both stood silently brooding on where the results were coming from.

"Let's get cracking then. Although what we're goin' to do about it beats me. We can't very well go round all the shops and houses and ask 'Has there been a murder 'ere lately?' And we can't start diggin' for bodies, because we've no bloomin' idea where to dig or who to dig for. All we can do is keep our eyes and ears open, and *hope* . . . Better take a stroll over to the housin' estate, and I'll take the town."

"What about Clowne?"

"What about him? You can ask him if he's heard anythin' unusual, can't you? Sometimes I despair of you, 'ubbard. Try to use the few brains you've got . . ."

Sid Clowne was the bobby who occupied the police house

on the new estate where the bulk of the ratepayers of Caldicott were herded in their little red brick houses. This was the most likely hunting-ground for missing or murdered persons.

"Go on, then, and get weavin' . . ."

Hubbard, who, according to his colleagues, had only two speeds, damned slow and stop, turned and left without another word.

Plumtree put on his helmet, took up his stick of office, and walked solemnly out of doors.

Upper Square was the oldest part of Caldicott. It was a complete quadrangle of old grey buildings, entered from the town below by Sheep Street, which gently rose from the Kegworth Ducis road, passed through a double line of shops, widened out to become the square, and then contracted and continued thence as the Cold Staunton—Peterborough highway.

The sergeant breathed deeply and looked about him. A nice spring morning. Languid smoke rose straight upwards from the chimneys of the square and the sun, shining over the roof of the Guildhall, cast the shadows of the double avenue of trees across the houses of the west side. A blackbird was singing loudly in the sycamore a few yards from the door of the police station. Plumtree looked up at it, recognised it, and nodded at it approvingly. It had a white feather in its tail, was officially known as Whitey, and had held pugnacious and noisy possession of its present perch for three years. Plumtree was very interested in birds . . .

The Guildhall clock struck nine. The bell of St. Hilary's, which stood at the top of the square, had done the same five minutes before, and now Plumtree could hear the 9.10 to Norwich leaving the station beyond the town, promptly, according to railway time. There was always bother about the time in Caldicott. Some said it was the damp, others sheer stupidity on the part of the inhabitants. The Caldicott Archers were reputed to have arrived at the Battle of Flodden ten minutes too late to enjoy the fun . . . Plumtree took out his own watch, a silver turnip inherited from his grandfather and which he boasted never gained or lost a second a day . . . Nine-sixteen . . .

Plumtree was sure the whole business was a hoax. A murder, indeed! This was Tuesday, and the notes had said last Friday. Not a word since. No bodies, no alarms, nobody reported missing. It was his theory that some Communist, member of the I.R.A., madman, mischievous schoolboy or enemy of the state was trying to destroy the morale of Abbot's Caldicott, and that the best thing to do was to treat the whole thing with contempt. But the Chief Constable . . .

The sergeant turned right and entered the Guildhall next door. The corporation pigeons, disturbed by his heavy tread, halted in their cooing and their festooning the building with droppings like white bunting, and took leisurely to the air. The place was almost deserted. Nothing much went on there before ten o'clock when some of the councillors started to hang about and the local justices arrived for the petty sessions. It was far too large for the needs of the small town, many rooms were closed, and there was an odour of dust and dry rot always there. But it had a history of its own and was a showplace for visitors.

In the days of the medieval wool trade, Abbot's Caldicott had been a busy and prosperous little metropolis. It was then that the Guildhall and the large church of St. Hilary had been erected, as well as most of the other buildings in the Upper Square where the wealthy merchants lived. Then, fortunes had declined . . . In 1928, the population of Caldicott had fallen below 1,000 and the dying little town had been scheduled to lose its borough status. It had been saved by three godsends. The establishment, almost simultaneously, of an R.A.F. depot, Cropper's Chemicals, Ltd., manufacturing a patent cleaner called *Whodunit*, and Samuel's Stockings (Caldicott), Ltd., with a large new weaving shed. The population had risen rapidly, a housing estate had grown up like a bed of mushrooms, and prosperity had returned with a bang. Now, the powers-that-be had decided to close the R.A.F. station for reasons known only to themselves, and *Whodunit* had gone bust. So Caldicott was starting to die all over again.

"Mornin', sergeant."

Fred Mold, who combined the duties of municipal carc-

taker, mayor's valet, and professional cobbler, emerged from his den, half office and half bucket and brush store, and greeted Plumtree. A little wizened man with a stiff leg from the first war.

"Mornin', Fred. Everythin' all right?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Just wondered."

What more could the sergeant say? Suppose he said, "you've not heard of any murders round here, have you?" Fred would think he'd gone off his chump. It was very awkward.

Plumtree sauntered into the open air again, and Mold followed his huge form with his spiteful little eyes until it disappeared. Then he returned to his football-pool form, clicking his tongue against his teeth.

"Plumtree's gettin' past it, or else a bit above himself."

On the other side of the Guildhall, the *Red Lion*, an old posting-house. George Hope, the landlord, small, hen-pecked, and gone to seed, was just sweeping out and about to push a heap of sawdust, fag-ends and spent matches down the grid in front of the pub. When he saw Plumtree, he paused, smiled sheepishly, and went indoors for a shovel. Poor George. Plumtree felt sorry for him. He'd married a French woman who put little tables and parasols out in front of the *Red Lion* in summer to make it look continental, and made George do the chores whilst she preened herself among the customers.

The great church of St. Hilary, with its vicarage attached, dominated the top of the square. From the school behind it came the sound of shrill sweet voices :

*His chariots of wrath the deep thunder clouds form,  
And dark is His path on the wings of the storm . . .*

Plumtree went hot and cold. It reminded him of what was likely to happen if he didn't report something to the Chief Constable soon.

Across the square, Eccles, the postman, was delivering letters. He slipped some envelopes in the letter-box of Dr. Beharrell, who practised in a large grey house, with a fine

doorway at the top of four stone steps and high sash windows, opposite the police station. Morning surgery began at ten, and already a few patients were starting to trickle through the open door of the waiting-room . . .

One minute, the square was just as usual, quiet, serene, dignified, dominated by the bronze soldier of the first-war memorial, charging with his bayonet in the direction of Sheep Street. The next minute, the whole place had sprung to life. A large pantehnicon, which almost completely blocked the entrance to the square, arrived and, after lumbering here and there like a huge frightened animal, came to rest. The driver thrust his head out of the cab, shouted at the postman, who shouted back and pointed with his thumb. Then the van drew up at the house of Dr. Bcharrell.

JEREMIAH NUTT, SONS AND NEPHEW, LTD.

PETERBOROUGH

REMOVALS

FULLY INSURED. ESTIMATES FREE BY ROAD, RAIL OR SEA.

Huge yellow letters on a black ground. The contraption seemed to fill the square.

On a flap hinged to the back of the van and supported by heavy chains, sat three men like wrestlers, their legs swinging, their expressions strong and pug-like, their short pipes all going. They were almost replicas of one another and of an elderly man who dismounted from the driving cab. He was, in turn, followed by a little wiry man, quite unlike the others, who reminded you of the runt in a litter and, compared with the rest, resembled it as well. He wore a suit made for somebody larger than himself. It was easy to recognise the *dramatis personæ* so boldly described on the pantehnieon.

At a signal from their parent, the three brothers peeled off their jackets, rolled up their shirt sleeves, revealing huge hairy arms, put on green baize aprons, and indicated to Nutt, senior, that they were ready. The nephew then followed suit more diffidently, disclosing sickly white arms with knobs on his elbows, and he started to beat them together as though the cold struck to his marrow.

Plumtree watching, remembered what it was all about. The aged mother of Dr. Beharrell had just died, he had been away to deal with her estate, and now he was sending some of the family furniture to his own spacious house.

Meanwhile, across the way, Dr. Beharrell's housekeeper, a scraggy peasant-like woman, was upbraiding the removal men. They had obviously arrived too soon and she wasn't ready for them. She was joined by a young man with a mop of red hair and big ears, who was the doctor's assistant. He, too, seemed in a rare temper and even looked ready to try conclusions with the lot of them. This might have been interesting, for the young doctor had the physique of a Rugby full-back. Mr. Nutt, senior, opened negotiations with dignity and restraint. He was small and fat, with a good-tempered red face, and looked like a benevolent clean-shaven Father Christmas. Meeting resistance, he ordered the runt of the party to start the engine in a threat to drive away and never come back. Agreement was thereupon quickly reached, the signal was given, and the team began their job.

Plumtree stood there fascinated by it all. A small crowd had gathered, and the seats which surrounded the charging bronze soldier rapidly filled up with old men.

First, the nephew scrambled inside the van like a monkey and flung out a shower of packing, old sacks, and wads used to protect the contents from injury. Then, the wrestlers began in procession to enter the vehicle and solemnly bear into the house the more precious parts of the load. All under the eagle eye of the old man, who looked ready to box the ears of any member who bungled a trick. Small fussy tables, lustre ornaments under glass globes, a stag's head, a musical box, four huge Chinese ornaments, a 'cello and a trombone, a brass standard lamp, a bead fire-screen, a marble clock. The strong men were transformed into ballet dancers in their efforts to be careful with the delicate parts of the cargo. Now and then, the nephew, sorting-out in the interior of the van, emerged to help with this or that, showing so much strength and enthusiasm, that he upset the balance of the load and had to be checked by his uncle.

The spectators gasped, murmured, and cheered, as one after another the valuable contents saw the light of day like prizes from a lucky paeket. The church cloek struek eleven as the small stuff was finished, whereupon, with the eonsent of Nutt *père*, the performers adjourned for refreshment to the *Red Lion*, where the landlady received them with cordiality and admiration, continually eyeing the rippling museles of the mighty bare arms with voluptuous pleasure.

Ten minutes later, they started again. This time the weight-lifters really showed what they could do. A huge mahogany sideboard with a carved eagle with glass eyes perched on the back, a large double-pedestal dining-table and twelve Regency chairs to go with it, a harpsiehord, an out-sized Chippendale wardrobe, an enorinous oak chest with 1687 plainly visible on the front panel . . . They all emerged from the van where the nephew was sorting them out, and vanished indoors with the greatest of ease. Then followed packing cascs which held valuable china . . . or so the spectators said. All the while, the senior Nutt did nothing but smoke his pipe, watch the procedure and rumble admonitions, cautions, or advice.

Whilst all this was going on, the doctor's housekeeper could be seen through the front windows, rushing madly here and there, ordering the wrestlers where to put their loads, and rebuking them for tecchnical faults. Now and then, the steady inflow of furniture was impeded by a patient from the surgery who got mixed up with the removal and was battered by a sideboard or borne into the interior behind a large wardrobe.

Sergeant Plumtree had retired to his offee, the window of which faced the present battleground. He stood there like a pillar of salt watching the strong men at work. 'It's all in the knack,' he kept saying, as though excusing himself for his own feelings of impotence. He had forgotten the dirty piece of paper warning him about a murder last Friday. He felt convinced that he was performing a genuine constabulary duty in seeing that all the proceedings at the home of Dr. Beharrell were carried out in a proper law-abiding manner.

At one o'clock it was all over and the nephew, whose name was Crumpet, restored the packing and old sacks to the van and solemnly closed it. The men then took off their green aprons, rolled down their sleeves, put on their coats, and presented themselves to their parent properly attired for lunch. Each carried a fibre case which held a gargantuan meal. They again crossed to the *Red Lion*.

At ten minutes past one, there was a fearful scream from the home of Dr. Beharrell. It disturbed the municipal pigeons in the silent square and they took to the air, wheeled once round the houses, and alighted again. Then, Mrs. Trott, the housekeeper, appeared at the door waving her arms and shouting incoherently. Sergeant Plumtree had just bitten in two, a huge sandwich which his missus had packed for his lunch, and he emerged from the police station with his jaws locked in brown bread and brawn. He was met by the trio of wrestlers, led by their father and followed by Crumpet, all of them masticating their own enormous rations.

"Wot the . . .?"

They all ran across the square, the removal party looking apprehensive, thinking of broken Crown Derby, Ming and Dresden. Mrs. Trott flailed them into the house indiscriminately, pushed her way through them, and led them to a room on the first floor. It might have been the doctor's own bedroom and was simply furnished in a calm, orderly way. The walls were ivory white, with here and there an engraving hanging on a nail. A double mahogany four-poster bed with a dark red quilt, a large Chippendale chest, two small period chairs, and little else. A bright room, illuminated by three sash windows, with heavy red curtains hanging from old-fashioned poles and brass rings.

The first thing the party encountered was the large antique wardrobe, which, on Mrs. Trott's instructions, the removal men had carried there and placed between the bed and the window to be properly manoeuvred into position later. The next thing was the door in the wall.

Mrs. Trott was going to have her say and explain everything before she let the rest of the group pass her. She stood in the space between the newly arrived wardrobe

and the rest of the room. Her eyes were wide with fear and her jaw trembled in a spasm of terror. She pointed at the wall opposite the door by which they had just entered.

"I've been here for fifteen years and I never knew that door there would open. I thought it was blocked up."

It was an ordinary door, painted white, gone soiled, and stood open. Beyond was a black void.

"I started to arrange the furniture and I thought I'd try to shift the wardrobe. I always thought it was a fixture, but when I pushed it, it moved, and there was the door behind it."

The wardrobe itself was also of plain wood, with panelled doors. The kind of thing known as "built-in" and fixed, as a rule, for all time.

Sergeant Plumtree was getting impatient.

"Well, that's nothin' fresh. It's an old 'ouse and these places always 'ave queer hidgy-holes here and there. It used to be a bank in the old days. Perhaps . . ."

In reply Mrs. Trott stood aside and let the party pass.

Mr. Nutt, senior, was first, and he looked in the void beyond the door, seemed unperturbed, cleared his throat, and whistled and nodded. His eldest son peeped over his shoulder, turned pale, recd back, and had to hold the wall to keep on his feet.

Plumtree's turn next. He took out a pocket-torch and switched it on. Then he peered gingerly through the dark hole into the interior, blew through his moustache, drew himself to his full height, and raised a huge paw in a benedictive manner.

"Nothin's to be touched. Nothin' . . . I 'creby take charge in the name o' the Law."

*A murder was committed at Abbot's Caldicott last Friday.*

The sergeant almost heaved a sigh of relief.

By the light of his torch, he could make out a small platform beyond the secret door, whence a plain wooden staircase descended into a black pit.

The body of Dr. Bcharrell was sitting comfortably on the small platform, cold and stiff.

Mrs. Trott uttered a second scream and fell unconscious on the parquet, and the youngest Nutt, the giant of the family, hurried out to find the bathroom, for he was going to vomit.

## 2

## THE MAN IN YELLOW GLOVES

THE train from Peterborough to Caldicott was a small one and stopped at every station. The compartment was overheated and every now and then Littlejohn nodded off. Cromwell, seated opposite, was already fast asleep. His bowler hat was on the rack above him and he wore a cap. A friend of his who had gone completely bald, had put the disaster down to leaning his head on the dirty upholstery of a train, and Cromwell had added another habit to the many precautionary measures he always took.

The train started and stopped, started and stopped. Littlejohn wiped the steam from the window and tried to follow the course of the journey, but could not make out the names of the stations in the dark. A silhouette, a lamp or two, a whistle, and the train moved on. Between halts, the lights of small villages or isolated farms relieved the landscape now and then.

There was one other occupant in the first-class compartment and as Littlejohn puffed his pipe he casually summed him up. He was dressed in a good tweed suit and a canary yellow waistcoat with brass buttons. In spite of the heat of the carriage, he had not removed his expensive shower-proof and green felt pork-pie hat with a pheasant's feather in the band. His brown shoes were highly polished and looked hand-made and he had kept on his yellow chamois gloves with which he handled an evening paper with finicky gestures. Now and then, he looked up and his eyes met those of Littlejohn, but no word passed between them.

A country gentleman . . . ? Or perhaps a retired colonial, a lawyer, or a bank manager? He looked about sixty—the age at which men of his type grow fussy about their appearance—with a clear rosy complexion, a long nervous face, and a small silver moustache. A large Roman nose, firm

mouth and chin, blue eyes under heavy eyebrows, and a good head of grey hair receding from the high narrow forehead. He wore an expensive pair of gold-framed spectacles.

Littlejohn looked at his watch and yawned. Another fifteen minutes to Caldicott, according to the railway schedule. He almost wished they'd travelled by road, but since early boyhood he had been fond of railways and even now obscure old lines interested him.

The Soke of Dofford police had asked for help from Scotland Yard almost as soon as the murder was discovered. In a way, the anonymous note had brought the Yard in the picture from the start and the Chief Constable was anxious not to let them out of it. Littlejohn had left King's Cross at three o'clock, but a breakdown somewhere on the main line had held them up, they'd missed their connection at Peterborough, and had to wait almost two hours.

The man in the lemon-coloured gloves opposite took out a gold cigarette-case, carefully selected a cigarette, fitted it in a holder, and lit it with a lighter. All without taking off the gloves. Then he looked at Littlejohn again, half turned his head away, glanced back, and decided to speak.

"Excuse me, sir. But are you Inspector Littlejohn, of Scotland Yard . . .?"

The voice was high-pitched and cultured.

Cromwell, who mustn't have been asleep after all, opened one eye.

"*Superintendent* Littlejohn . . ."

The man looked startled.

"I *beg* your pardon . . ."

"I said, *Superintendent* . . ."

"I'm sorry, *Superintendent* . . ."

"That's all right, sir. I was promoted a few days ago."

"My congratulations. My name's Pochin, Vincent Pochin. I'm a lawyer in Caldicott and an old friend of the dead doctor."

He paused to extinguish the cigarette under his heel.

"I wasn't quite sure it was you, at first. I've seen your photograph in the papers from time to time."

His tone was slightly apologetic, an excuse for reading

newspapers of the type which published detectives' pictures to illustrate lurid crime reporting.

"I'm surprised they've called in Scotland Yard already."

There was a trace of a question in the tone of his voice, as though Pochin were fishing for information. Littlejohn didn't help him. He didn't even tell him that what the police did was their own business, although judging from the expression on Cromwell's face, the sergeant was ready to do so if given the chance.

Pochin carefully folded his paper and put it in the pocket of his rainproof.

"As I was saying, I was a friend of Dr. Bcharrell. In fact, his lawyer. You know the facts of the case, Superintendent?"

"Barely. The body was found in some kind of a secret alcove off the doctor's bedroom and, according to medical opinion, must have been there since last Friday, when the murder occurred."

"That's right. The head had been smashed in by the usual blunt instrument. As regards the place where the body was found, Superintendent . . . it's interesting. Bcharrell occupied an old house in Upper Square, the oldest part of the town, which was formerly the place where the wealthy people lived. I'm particularly interested in the house, because it once belonged to my own family."

The train trundled on, stopped and started, jolted over points, and checked at signals, although what there was on that god-forsaken line to hold it up, was anybody's guess.

Pochin's voice was reedy and monotonous. The heat of the compartment, the late hour, the fug of tobacco smoke, and the shrill chant of the man in yellow gloves put Littlejohn in a stupor. He struggled to keep his eyes open and his wits working. Finally, he grew only half aware of the story; it came in odd words, like a message in a dream.

"House in Upper Square originally built by my family. . . about 1740 . . . big . . . rambling . . . One of oldest families in Caldicott . . . They were merchants . . . Wool trade . . . Then bankers. Pochin's Bank . . . *I'm not boring you, am I?*"

Littlejohn jumped.

"No . . . no . . . Of course not. It's very interesting. You were bankers, you were saying."

"Yes. The business was done on the ground floor, but the partners occupied a parlour on the first floor . . . the room Beharrell used as a bedroom. The wardrobe everybody seemed to think was a fixture was actually movable. It concealed a door which led by a secret stairway to the cellars, where there was a strong-room. The partners could thus obtain books or valuables without going down and through the main banking office."

"The strong-room is still there?"

"Yes. A poor affair by modern standards, but for those days, quite a formidable job. The police found it had been forced open. They'll already have told you, I presume?"

"No, sir. As I said, we only got the bare facts of the case."

"As the Beharrell family lawyer, I naturally had to interest myself in the affair. The police told me of the safe-break. We haven't any idea what the strong-room contained. It does make the motive look like one of robbery, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps . . ."

Littlejohn began his struggle against sleep again. He couldn't stop Pochin's flow of information now he'd started.

"Beharrell was the last of an old family . . . Father arrived in the town about 1850. A farrier with a flair for bonesetting. Soon, people were coming from all over the country for treatment. He wanted large premises for his patients. Pochin's Bank had been bought over by a larger county institution. Bank House was empty. Old Beharrell bought . . . Bought the house next door, too. So many patients, the place was like a private hospital . . ."

Littlejohn shook himself.

"The late Beharrell was a qualified man, though?"

"Oh, yes. The first Beharrell and his son were mere bonesetters. Then, Justin Beharrell . . . that's the one who's just died . . . Justin qualified."

"Married?"

Pochin coughed behind his yellow glove.

"Married a girl a lot younger than himself. He was sixty when he died. She was nearly twenty years younger than he. Ran away with an Air Force officer stationed in Caldicott in 1941. Neither of them ever seen again. Theory was they got killed in a London air raid. Couldn't have got out of the country, could they . . . ? *Could they?*"

Littlejohn jerked from his stupor again to find the blue, rather watery eyes looking at him in a way which seemed to beseech an answer.

"I don't know . . . I don't know the facts, you see, sir."

The train stopped with a jerk again.

"This is Caldicott . . . Are you staying here or going on to the next station, Dofford?"

"I understand rooms have been booked for us at the *Red Lion*."

"Right opposite the scene of the crime in Upper Square."

Pochin buttoned his coat, tightened his gloves, and set his green hat straight. Cromwell put on his bowler and stuffed his cap in his pocket. He was half asleep and annoyed with the lawyer for disturbing them.

They descended to the dark platform. Two lamps illuminated a small rectangle near the booking-office and waiting room. Nobody boarded the train which moved out and away into the night before the few passengers reached the exit of the station. Pochin must have had a season-ticket and merely nodded to the collector, who touched his cap and bade him goodnight.

"Taxi, sir?"

Pochin hailed it.

"My car is parked in the station approach there and I go in the opposite direction from you. The hotel is in Upper Square, a little short of a mile away. We shall meet again. Goodnight."

He quickly vanished in the direction where his car waited, as though eager to get off before he grew obliged to give them a lift.

"*Red Lion* Hotel . . . "

They settled in the cab. Cromwell yawned.

"It's nearly eleven, sir. Funny chap, that Pochin. Probably a big frog in a little pool here in Caldicott. He seems to know all that goes on, too. A windbag, I'd call him."

The town was dead. Lights in a few windows of pubs and over shops. Hardly a soul about. They climbed a hill, entered a square of tall buildings, and halted before the *Red Lion*. A solitary light shone through the glass doors which were flanked by two palm trees in green-painted tubs. Madame Hope's efforts to gallicize the place. At first, she'd wanted to re-name it *Hôtel de France*, but the brewster sessions had soon put a stop to that idea.

Madame met them in the hall. A tall, dark, full-figured woman of about forty, and eager to please any good-class clients who came. She was a voluptuous beauty, who knew how to keep her good looks against the temptations of over-eating and the despair of hiding her light as the wife of a small-town publican.

"Good evening. The gentlemen of the police? Your rooms are ready."

She was the kind who normally might be expected to be vivacious and volatile, but either their late arrival, the tragedy overhanging the square, or some private trouble of her own was making her subdued and gave her beauty a sultry, sulky look. She could not, however, resist flashing a look of approval on the newcomers. She had fine eyes, and even at that late hour, her make-up was neat and well done.

"You would like something to eat, gentlemen?"

"Something cold?"

"The roast chicken we prepared for you is now cold. Would you like some of it with a salad?"

"Thanks."

"And a bottle of white wine? A nice *Pouilly* . . .?"

Littlejohn smiled and she misinterpreted it.

"It will all be paid for by the Chief of Police, Major Jessop."

"I think two pints of beer will suit us better just now, Mrs. . . .?"

"Mrs. Hope . . ."

"You are French . . .?"

"Yes. I married Mr. Hope, the landlord here, eight years ago."

"What part of France are you from?"

"Cagnes, near Nice."

"I know it well."

"You will perhaps remember the *Auberge du Bon Pasteur*, then. I was brought up there. My uncle owns it. My parents died when I was a child and I lived with my aunt and uncle."

"You met Hope during the war?"

"No. On holiday. He was chauffeur for Dr. Beharrell at the time. They spent a holiday there. Mr. Hope asked me if I would like to come to England and have an hotel of my own. We came here."

"You like it?"

She shrugged her fine shoulders. She had an air of breeding above that of a provincial publican's wife. Her English was good and she chose her words with educated care.

"We are all upset on account of the death of Dr. Beharrell. He was a good friend of both of us . . . But I must go and get the supper. I must also telephone to Major Jessop. He has been on the telephone three times enquiring about you and I promised to let him know when you arrived. Have you a message for him?"

"Yes. Please tell him there was a breakdown on the main line and we missed our connection. It is too late now for us to report to him, so we'll see him early in the morning."

"Very good, sir. Supper won't be long. It is all ready."

Littlejohn and Cromwell went to their rooms for a wash. They had given them modern quarters on the front of the hotel, facing the house where Beharrell had been killed. They even had a shower apiece. The whole set-up spoke of good management and the hand of a well-trained, energetic woman about the place.

Littlejohn drew back the curtain and looked over the silent square. Somebody with good sense on the council had succeeded in keeping the old gas lamps, which still glowed with a greenish light all round the periphery. Large,

ornamental lanterns, they were, which had probably been there since gas first came to Caldicott.

The bronze soldier, set in a flower-bed, the wallflowers of which dominated the evening air with their fragrance, was silhouetted against the trees of the perimeter. In two or three of the large houses, lights were showing on the upper floors. The dark mass of the church of St. Hilary formed the fourth side, and as Littlejohn watched, there burst from the belfry a cascade of chimes which rang the half hour. He was able to make out the steel tubes of some scaffolding which surrounded the tall square tower.

Right opposite, the house of Dr. Beharrell, with a frontage of iron railings, a basement gate, the doctor's brass plate glinting in the light of the lamps. A tall, square edifice, with three storeys of triple sash windows, a Georgian façade—probably added to a former building—and a fine pillared doorway. A light glowed behind the drawn blinds of the first floor.

Downstairs, they found the table laid for two, with cold meats, salad, trifle, and cheeses of three kinds. They were served in a small dining-room, newly and elegantly decorated in the same good style as the upstairs rooms. The motor clubs and several so-called travelling epicures had awarded the *Red Lion* their accolades for hospitality, and the landlady was determined to keep and merit them.

"If there is anything more you need, gentlemen, please ring the bell by the fireplace. We are a little distracted by the tragedy here and you must excuse any shortcomings. I understand you have come to help the local police bring the murderer to justice. We wish you well and will do all we can to make you comfortable."

"Oh, yes, be sure of that, gents. We wish you good-luck, in spite of the fact that Beharrell deserved all that was comin' to him."

The voice came from the open doorway, where Mr. Hope himself had appeared with a tray bearing the two pints of beer. He had been drinking in his own department and wobbled as he walked.

"My husband is upset, too. He doesn't know what he is saying."

Mrs. Hope was anxious to get him out of the room, but Hope showed a tendency to stay and talk.

"Don't you try to push me around, missus. And don't make any excuses for me. I mean what I said. Beharrell got wot was comin' to him. Now, didn't he? You should know, Mrs. Hope. You should know."

He put down the two tankards and breathed a blast of whisky in Littlejohn's direction. Then he stood back, still holding the tray horizontally on the tips of his fingers.

"The truth was, gents, Doctor Beharrell couldn't leave the women alone. Could he, Claudine?"

The woman was furious and her breast heaved and her fine eyes glowed with anger. With a strength quite in keeping with her build, she seized her husband from behind, under the armpits. He was at once reduced to a helpless beseeching mass of heaving muscles.

"Don't tickle me, Claudine . . . Leave me alone . . . Get away . . ."

He fought to recover the advantage, but she hung on to him like a wild animal, her fingers digging in his ribs, following his every move to keep behind him. Finally, she manoeuvred him, yelling hysterically, to the door, pushed him through, and returned to set matters right.

"I must apologise again for my husband, sirs. He has been very upset by Dr. Beharrell's death. After all, he was in his employ as chauffeur for many years. He has been drinking to forget, and it does not agree with him. He is a nervous man and takes his drink badly. He will apologise himself in the morning. I hope you have not been disturbed."

"Not at all. We'll finish our meal and retire very soon. I'm sorry we're so late, Mrs. Hope."

"The Chief of Police says he hopes you'll have a comfortable night and he will call at the police station here to see you in the morning about ten o'clock. And, by the way, Mr. Hope spoke in a very unseemly manner of the dead. Dr. Beharrell was a good man and what my husband said of his ways with women is untrue. He will tell you so himself in the morning. Goodnight. Leave the lights. The porter will see to them."

She left them, now calm again, and disappeared in the passage.

"Well . . ."

Cromwell sighed and set about his supper.

"We seem to have picked up quite a lot of information locally already, true or untrue. I can understand Dr. Beharrell taking a fancy to Mrs. Hope. Any man who's a bachelor or its equivalent might be shaken by her, but to have him and her denounced by the wretched drunken husband before he's even been introduced, is a good start, isn't it?"

They were too tired to talk much more, but ate their meal quietly, old friends understanding each other's silence, and then went to bed without even a final smoke.

The last thing Littlejohn remembered was the tinkling chimes of St. Hilary's striking half past one, and the scent of wallflowers filling his room.

## 3

## UPPER SQUARE

"ANOTHER!"

Littlejohn and Cromwell had hardly started breakfast before a third visitor arrived. This time it was Sergeant Plumtree.

The maid had called them just before eight and Littlejohn had quickly flung back the curtains to get a look at the place in daylight.

The window gave a full view of the square, the heart of Caldicott, which was just starting to beat. The corporation garbage-cart was doing the rounds and two hefty men were leisurely collecting dust-bins behind the houses, emptying their contents in their large tank-like vehicle, and then giving the bins a final pounding on the sides of the cart to make sure the job was properly completed. This racket kept the town pigeons circling frenziedly round the square. Then, the tower of St. Hilary's added to the symphony of percussion by casting out the chimes of eight o'clock, followed by a flock of jackdaws which joined the pigeons in a single circuit and then returned to the church.

The house of Dr. Beharrell stood right opposite the hotel and the one next door which the old bonesetter had, years ago, added to his property. To the left of that, another large three-storied building, with a gilt sign. SWITHIN GRALAM. ANTIQUES. To the right of Beharrell's, a tall narrow property with a barber's sign over the door. ERIC GIBBET. LADIES AND GENTS HAIRDRESSER. COIFFURES MODERNES. A sergeant of police was ponderously entering the barber's shop.

Between the antique dealer's and the vicarage of the church, was a gap where the main road through the square left for Cold Staunton and Peterborough. Through this space, Littlejohn got a narrow view of an immense stretch

of flat country, with a great church tower in the distance, drainage canals, low farms and clusters of small houses scattered about. The sun was shining and a thin mist curled over the low fields.

The bedroom itself showed that fresh capital had recently been sunk in this old hotel. Everywhere good taste, and money to indulge it. A shower-bath in a tiled alcove, white walls, polished floors, a light oak bed, and cretonne curtains.

Next door a rhythmic bumping told that Cromwell was performing his daily exercises.

They went down together and the landlady met them in the hall, conducted them to a small dining-room, and asked if they wished for English or Continental breakfast. This place, too, had been recently furnished in plain tasteful style, with small tables covered with red and white check table cloths.

"I hope you have both slept well."

Mrs. Hope was well-groomed and fresh at that early hour. She flashed a smile at Cromwell who asked for bacon and eggs and nodded sympathetically at Littlejohn when he ordered rolls and coffee. The bread was freshly made and warm.

Then Hope himself put in an appearance. He didn't look half as fit as his wife. Pale puffy cheeks, bags under his eyes, his tie askew. His wife had made him put on a jacket, collar and tie, which he didn't usually wear until lunch time.

"Mornin', sirs . . . "

Hope was nervous and husky and had obviously been ordered to make his peace with his guests.

"I gather, sirs, I was a bit sharp with you last night. S'matter of fact, I'd been havin' a drink or two with some old customers and I'm afraid I overdid it. I've no notion of what I said to you, but the wife says it was a bit thick. I'm sorry, sirs, and I hope you'll forget it."

"Don't mention it."

The bell in the hall thereupon rang and Hope made a quick excuse and exit to answer it. It was Sergeant Plumtree calling to pay his respects.

"Another!"

Plumtree said he wouldn't come in until the Scotland Yard men had finished their meal, and remained talking to Hope in the passage, his voice echoing like a bass bassoon round the staircase.

"Have you ever noticed, sir, that wherever we stay, there's some sort of drama going on between the landlord and his wife."

He had set about his bacon and eggs with gusto and as his hunger slowly vanished, his humour returned.

"Remember the Blowitts, sir, in the Enderby case.<sup>1</sup> The landlord locked himself in a room and played the piano after they'd had a tiff, and then she ran off with a man with a glass eye and left him with the pub to himself. Which seemed to suit him, because he married the blonde barmaid . . ."

Plumtree entered nervously, but swelled visibly after Littlejohn and Cromwell had shaken him by the hand and the Superintendent had invited him to remove his helmet, sit down, and take a cup of coffee with them.

The barber had made a good job of Plumtree in honour of his distinguished visitors and the forthcoming inquest on Dr. Beharrell that morning. His hair was clipped right down to his scalp, his bushy eyebrows had been groomed, his moustache trimmed, and the hairs which usually sprouted from his ears and nostrils removed.

"Been havin' a good wash for the occasion?" Hope had offensively asked.

"Tell them I'm 'ere, and no sauce from *you*."

Plumtree didn't quite know what was expected of him. This was his first murder case and Scotland Yard and its occupants were to his modest imagination as alien and remote as the North Pole. He had read about them in paper-backed novels and grubby books his wife borrowed at twopence a time from a nearby stationer's library. It gave him quite a pleasant shock to find that Littlejohn smoked a pipe and Cromwell was as fond of bacon and eggs as he was himself.

"Just two ordinary fellows, they are. The Super's a pro-

*Corpses in Enderby* by George Bellairs (John Gifford, 10s. 6d.)

per toff and you wouldn't think to see him that he was famous at all," he told his wife in bed that night. But, after almost an hour of exhausting narrative of the day's events, she was asleep. Thus do the wives of great men preserve their husbands' modesty and sense of proportion.

"I believe you found the body, sergeant."

"Yes, sir. As soon as the Chief Constable arrives, we'll go over and inspect the 'ouse."

"And medical evidence puts death down as taking place last Friday?"

"Yes, sir."

"The day mentioned on the three notes which we received between us?"

"That is so, sir."

Plumtree was speaking in his posh voice, as though talking with a plum in his mouth.

"I've had a report on the notes themselves—our own and the two your police were good enough to send me. The paper was slightly better than newsprint; the sort used for magazines of a cheap variety. No fingerprints. Our experts think the writing was that of an educated man trying to make it appear illiterate."

Plumtree's eyes grew round with wonder and his mouth opened as though he were about to burst into a song of praise.

"... The letter 'e' on one note had been made in Greek style."

Littlejohn showed Plumtree how it had been done by making a Greek 'e' on the tablecloth with his thumbnail.

"Then, the writer had tried to obliterate it by superimposing an ordinary 'e.' But we have ways of bringing such things to light."

Plumtree blinked. Here was a matter with which he would dazzle his wife and family tonight! They thought a policeman's job was pounding a beat and organising traffic and little boys. He'd show 'em... But the Greek 'e' which he drew with his own fingernail that evening was the wrong way round, and he was duly corrected by his eldest, who was a bright boy... The tale fell flat. But has nothing

to do with the ease of the deceased Dr. Beharrell.  
"What kind of a man was the doctor?"

"A bit odd, sir. His father and grandfather before him were in the same house as doctors, only they were quacks, sir. No degrees, you see. But the doctor went to the university. His wife ran away with a R.A.F. officer during the war. A lot younger than him, she was, and very good-lookin', I'm told, sir. After that, the doctor became a recluse. Never went out much except to see patients."

"He was murdered in his own room, I believe."

"Yes, sir. His mother 'ad recently died, suddenly. She lived near Peterborough and when we didn't see the doctor, we thought he'd gone to attend to her affairs. In fact, a vanful of her belongings 'ad arrived from her home and it was tryin' to re-arrange the furniture to find room for the stuff that had come from Peterborough, that Mrs. Trott, the housekeeper, moved the wardrobe she always thought was a fixture, found the secret door, opened it, and there was the body . . ."

"So he hadn't been away, at all."

"Yes, he had, sir. He'd been off to sort out what he wanted from his mother's house. Must have done. How else was it decided what should come by van and what stay at Peterborough?"

"And he returned unknown to anybody last Friday."

"Yes, sir. If you'd care to look here in my book, you'll get an idea of his movements checked at this end and at the Peterborough end, where the woman as kept house for his mother was able to supply the information. I went there yesterday."

Plumtree thereupon drew a black notebook from his breast pocket, snapped back the elastic band and, breathing heavily, introduced Littlejohn to the contents, written in a laborious, sprawling hand.

Information supplied by Mrs. Mills, housekeeper to Mrs. Beharrell, Peterborough.

Saturday, May 12.—Mrs. Beharrell taken ill with heart attack. Dr. Beharrell notified.

Sunday, May 13.—Dr. Beharrell called to see his mother at 2.0 p.m. Left at 3.0 p.m. saying he had urgent patient to see.

Monday, May 14.—Mrs. Beharrell died suddenly. Dr. B. called for half an hour same evening.

Thursday, May 17.—Funeral of Mrs. B. Dr. B. attended and left immediately after.

Friday, May 18.—Doctor at Peterborough selecting furniture to be sent to his house, 2.0—3.0 p.m.

Plumtree turned over to the next page.

"And 'ere, sir, is what you might call the reverse end—the information supplied by Mrs. Trott, the doctor's house-keeper, and Dr. Macfarlane, his assistant.

Sunday, May 13.—Dr. Beharrell had no urgent patient to see, as far as Dr. Macfarlane knows.

Thursday, May 17.—Dr. B. arrived home about 4.30 after funeral.

Friday, May 18.—Dr. B. left home about noon to go to sort out mother's furniture. Not seen again by Mrs. Trott or Dr. MacF. N.B.—Mrs. Trott's day off and she went out from 2.0 till 9.30. Dr. MacF. indoors until 3.0. Then went on visits till 5.30. Evening surgery 6.30—8.0.

Littlejohn handed back the book.

"You seem to have made a thorough job of it, Plumtree. It confirms Dr. Beharrell's tendencies to be a recluse. He couldn't even spare time to stay long with his dying mother."

"Since his wife left him, he'd gone very queer, sir. Jumpy and nervous and reluctant to leave home for long at once. Dr. Macfarlane told me Dr. Beharrell hadn't been away

on holidays for years and years. Hadn't even slept away from home for a single night . . .”

There was a pause as a maid came and cleared away the breakfast things. St. Hilary's struck ten.

Plumtree consulted his large watch.

“The Chief Constable's due any minute, sir. St. Hilary's is five minutes fast according to the wireless pip-pips. I said I'd ask you to come to the police station to meet 'im.”

“Right. Lead on then, Plumtree.”

They all adjourned to the police headquarters a couple of doors away. This time the Guildhall clock was striking ten. Plumtree looked exasperated.

“It's a proper job to get the right time in Caldicott. You'd observe the church clock struck five minutes before the Guildhall. Yesterday, it was strikin' *after*. The church clock's suddenly gone haywire, strikin' all sorts o' times at all sorts o' hours. That's what the scaffolding's there for. One of the pieces of the dial got broke and they found a jackdaw nestin' in the machinery.”

“Why is this called Upper Square? Is there a Lower Square somewhere?”

Cromwell, puffing his pipe, was admiring the old houses and the beds of flowers surrounding the bronze soldier.

“Oh, no. There's no other square, Mr. Cromwell. It really means the upper-class square. Where the upper-ten lived for hundreds of years. Now, as you see, its mainly commercial and offices.”

With a wide sweep of his paw, Plumtree indicated all sides of the square. Next to the barber's shop, two houses converted into private offices, with a long column of plates on the door jamb. Adjacent to the police station, an old house used by medical consultants, judging from the names on the door, and then a small shop in the window of which a stylish blonde was placing a solitary hat. MADAME JOCELIN, MODES. The girl in the window waved a jaunty greeting to Plumtree, who blushed.

From an open window above the hat shop came first the strains of a piano, then a shrill voice howling scales went up and down and consecutively higher and higher until Plumtree could stand it no more. He furiously rang the

bell at the door labelled MADAME ALCARDI, BEL CANTO.

"Tell madame," he sternly said to a pupil who answered, "tell madame to shut the window. There's an h'inqwest on at the Guildhall this mornin' and all that row isn't decent."

"Howlin'!" he muttered to himself as the window above his head was flung down with a resounding bang.

The police station was a small place with a private office, a charge-room, constables' quarters, and cells below. The furniture was plain and shabby from long use and the green walls needed another coat of paint. The air smelled of disinfectant and of the stale scented brilliantine with which Hubbard anointed himself now and then. The walls of Plumtree's office were covered with official notices, a large map of the district, and a huge chart showing how to apply artificial respiration in cases of drowning or electric shock.

A police car drew up outside and the Chief Constable emerged in a series of contorted efforts. Major Jessop, a large, heavy, pug-faced man, who had risen from the ranks and distinguished himself in the Middle East during the war. The four big men seemed to fill the private room to capacity.

There was an exchange of greetings and civilities. Plumtree was a bit put-out because he couldn't offer tea all round, but that morning Hubbard, in the course of washing-up, had dropped the teapot among the saucers and smashed the lot.

"As far as I'm concerned, Littlejohn, the case is all yours. If you need any help, just ask for it. But I don't believe in cluttering up the wicket. You can't see wood for trees with men crawling all over the place. Plumtree will help, of course. He knows Caldicott like the palm of his hand. How and why Beharrell was murdered, just beats me. We haven't a clue so far. I freely admit it. You perhaps think we're *playing* at investigating this case. But remember we haven't the experience and organisation of Scotland Yard. The local police are more used to crime disposed of at the petty sessions than murder. Whoever murdered Beharrell might have waited a bit longer. I'm due to retire in six months!"

Which was only to be expected. With the exception of Plumtree's notes after his enquiries, and the three warning messages, there seemed to be no tangible means of starting the case. One thing, however, was cleared up. The two envelopes sent to the Dofford and Caldicott police were clearly post-marked and had been posted at the main office in Caldicott in time for the last clearance at nine o'clock on the night of Beharrell's murder.

Outside, the square was beginning to liven up. Whitey, the blackbird, was singing in the tree opposite the police station. The seats in the little enclosure round the bronze soldier were all full of old men, eager for news. Word had gone round that Scotland Yard officers were at work on the case of Dr. Beharrell. Eyes were all glued on the police-station and tongues were wagging. A lot of theories were bandied about. A coal-cart drew up and began to discharge bags in the basement of Dr. Beharrell's house, and the tactlessness of the delivery, at the very time of his inquest, tickled the spectators round the war memorial, who shouted jests and insults at the coalman. He bared the white teeth in his black face and said he couldn't care less.

Mr. Nutt, *père*, passed, dressed in his black funeral suit and tie and wearing a bowler hat. The Coroner had originally called on the sons and nephew to give evidence as well, but Mr. Nutt, senior, after threatening to write to his M.P., had been given permission to represent the rest. The Coroner himself then emerged from the offices next door to the barber's shop, and bearing the plate POCHIN, SHILLINGLAW AND POCHIN. A tall, thin, irascible-looking man with white hair and a limp from a first-war wound.

"That's Shillinglaw, the Coroner," said Major Jessop. "It's time we went to the inquest. Perhaps you'd care to come, Littlejohn. It'll give you an idea of what the dead doctoer was like."

"Is he a lawyer?"

"Yes. Pochin, Shillinglaw and Pochin, just over the way."

"Pochin? We met one of the partners in the train last night. Vincent Pochin . . .?"

"That's right. A good sort, but not much of a lawyer.

He'd rather play the country gentleman. Sam Pochin and Shillinglaw keep the firm alive. Best lawyers in town. Shillinglaw married a Miss Pochin. He's brother-in-law to his two partners. Well . . . Shall we go?"

Sitting in the sunshine in the little flower-garden, the pensioners were having a red-letter day. Coroner, witnesses, and now the police in procession with the two London chaps. Some of them stood up to get a better view and then, at the suggestion of one of their party, they all rose and hobbled over to the Guildhall to attend the inquest in person.

"That's the vicar," whispered Plumtree to Littlejohn as they neared the Guildhall. A tall fat man, wearing an over-coat in spite of the nice morning, and a black felt hat, was closing the vicarage gate. He paused to look up at the scaffolded tower, and slowly made his way past Beharrell's house without so much as a glance at it, or at anything else in the square, for that matter. A pink, heavy face, white hair showing under his hat, and a troubled, abstracted look, like someone in a dream.

"Rev. Horninglow . . . Canon Horninglow, to be h'exact. A terribly absent-minded man. A widower. Needs another wife . . ."

With these words of wisdom, Plumtree ushered them into the Guildhall, the clock of which then struck half past ten. The Coroner enjoyed the hospitality of the petty sessions court, which, when the police entered, was jammed to the doors. A smallish room, furnished in heavy pitch-pine and smelling of floor polish and human bodies. The pensioners from the public gardens were now crushed in the small gallery which hung over the back of the court.

The Coroner entered and the audience rose, except the occupants of the gallery, who were packed so tight they couldn't get on their feet in time. Having settled himself and seen that his clerk and a policeman were near at hand, Mr. Shillinglaw ordered all the windows to be opened and the lights extinguished.

"It's a waste of public money on a sunny morning."

The sun shone through the large stained-glass windows, which depicted scenes from the past greatness of Abbot's

Caldicott, and suffused the faces of the congregation in blues, yellows, reds and golds.

Mr. Shillinglaw sat with a jury, dressed in their best and looking very self-conscious. One of their number was a member of the club which regularly held its meetings sitting round the bronze soldier, and his friends in the gallery gave a gratified grunt when he put in an appearance. The jury had inspected the body. The dead man had no surviving blood relatives, so Mrs. Trott and Dr. Macfarlane gave evidence of identification.

The police surgeon stated that death had been caused by a fracture of the skull and lacerations of the brain inflicted by a heavy blunt instrument.

"Has this instrument been found?"

"There was a heavy crowbar in the cellar, which might have been used."

"The police found it. There were, I believe, no finger-prints on it."

"A poker, or a piece of lead-piping, too, could have caused such injuries. They could not have been self-inflicted. The crowbar did strike me as being too cumbersome altogether."

"And the time of death?"

"Friday, the 18th instant. Some time in the late afternoon, as deduced by the police, would coincide with the state of the body."

"Which was found yesterday noon. How can you be so precise, doctor, as to the *time* on Friday the 18th?"

"Mrs. Trott, I believe, has stated she left the dead man's tea ready when she went out, in case he returned. A cold, light meal, which he usually ate at five thirty, dining later at eight. A very methodical man. The stomach was quite empty when I examined the body. I assumed the mid-day meal had been completely digested. He was stated to have left Peterborough at about three o'clock and, normally, would have eaten his afternoon tea at five-thirty. He probably died between four and five-thirty."

"Thank you, doctor."

Mrs. Trott, Mr. Jeremiah Nutt, and Sergeant Plumtree then spoke of discovering the body of Dr. Beharrell, and

departed. Mrs. Trott had made it quite plain that, until she tried to move the built-in wardrobe, in the hope that the newer large one could take its place, she had been unaware that the secret door behind it would open. She had seen the secret staircase which led from the cellar, often enough, but the top of the stairs was in the dark and she always thought the door there had been bricked up long ago.

Mr. Shillinglaw, handling the case with exemplary skill and patience, had dealt with identity, cause and time of death, and, at the request of the police, had gently skated over the matter of the three warning notes. Now, he set about motive, within the jurisdiction of his court.

Mr. Elijah Twigg was called. He was a locksmith and those who knew his skill were glad he was on the side of law and order. He was a stocky little man, dark and hairy, and he wore powerful spectacles which made his eyes look like small shoe-buttons at the bottom of a pool.

"You inspected the strong-room in the cellar of Dr. Beharrell's house, Mr. Twigg?"

"Yes, sir. You'd 'ardly call it a strong-room. More like a sardine-tin, by all modern standards."

The pensioners in the gallery thought that was a good one, and made so much noise in laughter and applause, that the Coroner warned them that one more chirp from their direction and they'd find themselves sitting once again around the bronze soldier.

"You examined the strong-room? We'll continue to call it that for convenience."

"Yes, sir. It had been forced open."

"The lock had not been tampered with?"

"No, sir. It was intact. The whole door had been forced open by somebody usin' a large crowbar, I should say. It was easy, sir. The door was a couple of hundred years old, maybe. A thick sheet of wrought-iron on very good hinges. The doorway was of good blue brick and the door was set in it. Whoever broke in, chopped out the bricks just near the lock, used the crowbar as a lever against the door, and by throwin' his weight on the lock, snapped off the tongue, and he could then open the door. As I said, it might have

been safe enough in the days when it was built, but now . . . It would be chicken feed to a proper cracksmen."

" You think, then, the motive was burglary?"

" I can't understand it at all, sir. I could 'ave picked the lock in two shakes, and I'm only an ironmonger, not a professional."

There was another shout of mirth from the gallery, but Mr. Shillinglaw chose, this time, to ignore it.

" If a burglar knew there was a safe in Dr. Beharrell's cellar, he'd go prepared, sir. And by that I mean with tools for opening the lock, not pullin' down the whole bloomin' strong-room . . . beg pardon, sir. Tools, sir, not a crowbar . . ."

" So, the intruder was an amateur?"

Mr. Twigg seemed to be looking for a place in which to spit out his contempt.

" Not even an amachewer."

He scratched his bald head.

" I don't know who it 'ud be. It's got me beat. Not only did he use a crowbar, but once inside the strong-room, he packed up. There was a sort of coffer there which you'd say was where the real valuables was kept. What does he do, sir? He ignores it, although with the same crowbar, he could have got in it like openin' a tin of salmon."

" That's right. He didn't open it, because he was perhaps disturbed by Dr. Beharrell, whom he killed, and that forced him to flee and leave the job undone. I understand that the coffer has since been opened. Is that right, Sergeant Plumtree?"

" Yes, sir. With Dr. Beharrell's key. It contained . . . well it was chock-full of banknotes, only they was the notes of a bank in Caldicott that went bust . . . I mean bankrupt, over a hundred years ago. They wasn't worth the paper they was written on, sir."

" Thank you, sergeant."

It might have been quite an easy verdict. Someone had heard of the old strong-room in Dr. Beharrell's cellar and tried, with primitive tools, to get inside it. The doctor had returned unexpectedly, surprised the intruder, and had been murdered by a blow on the head, perhaps with the

very crowbar used to force open the door. And then the murderer had fled. Just plain, sordid robbery by a burgler who didn't know his job properly.

Only the jury and the audience didn't know about the warning notes, which, after all, might have been written by a witness to the crime, or even by a penitent lunatic who had done the murder himself and was seeking an outlet for his emotions.

The inquest was adjourned for further enquiries and all that came out of it was permission for the decent burial of Dr. Beharrell.

## 4

## THE OLD BANK HOUSE

THEY had lunched at the *Red Lion* with the Chief Constable, who had never ceased over the meal from discussing the case. As they ate, they could see the experts from the C.I.D. at Dofford going over Dr. Bcharrell's house again for more photographs and fingerprints. The first lot had revealed nothing at all, and the Chief Constable had sent them back again for a closer inspection. Finally, Littlejohn and Cromwell were left to themselves with a parting injunction from the Chief to make good use of Plumtree.

The pair from Scotland Yard stood at the door of the hotel looking round the square. It was a bit dilapidated now, but in its heyday, it must have been a pleasant spot. The houses facing the Guildhall had all neat little wrought-iron balconies outside their first-floor windows and you could imagine the ladies of fashion of long ago sitting there watching the civic functions and parades going on over the way. The long stretch of pavement in front of the church of St. Hilary was known as the Parade. In days of past prosperity and strict social distinction, the carriages of the patricians of Caldicott must have drawn up there after service, whilst their owners displayed their Sunday bonnets and other finery to the world around.

Littlejohn was caught up by the atmosphere of the whole place. This had evidently been a little metropolis for the villages from miles around. The local bigwigs had lived here and done their civic business. The bank, the mayor's house, the posting inn, the doctor. History was written on the very walls of the houses, some of which still bore the corroded remnants of extinguishers for the linkmen's torches, and their extensive basements told of cheap and adequate staffing. Here and there, an old iron ring hanging from a wall indicated where travellers had tied up their

horses. The town council still had the good sense to forbid alterations to the frontages of properties in the square without permission, and the parking of cars there was forbidden.

Littlejohn was sure his work lay in this old square, among the inhabitants, the neighbours of the late Dr. Beharrell, until he knew them all like old friends and as though he'd lived there all his life. By the time his task was finished, they would probably have few secrets from him.

"Let's go across and take a look at Dr. Beharrell's house."

It was two-thirty according to Littlejohn's watch, and there were no surgery hours at Bank House, the doctor's place, in the afternoons. As they had lunched, they'd seen Dr. Macfarlane bring his car from the park behind the church and drive off, presumably going on a round of visits.

Mrs. Trott answered the bell. Her face was set as she opened the door, but softened as she found she hadn't would-be patients to deal with. At closer range and now that her ordeal of the last few days was almost over, she was less forbidding. She was tall and scraggy, admitted, but her face in repose was kindly and resigned and she seemed anxious to help if she could.

"Could we look over the house, Mrs. Trott?"

"Yes. Now that all those men from the police have gone, dustin' their powder over everythin' and frightening the life out of you with their explodin' cameras, the place is more like its old self again. Did you want to see anythin' particular, sir?"

"No. Just to browse over the rooms and get an idea of what the doctor's life was like."

The woman sniffed.

"He was a good master. Never a better. But there was nothin' much about his life that wasn't 'umdrum, I can tell you. Regular as clockwork always. Up at seven. Breakfast at eight. A faddy man. If you spilled coffee in his saucer, he took on like anything. Very clean and tidy in his ways. And very fond of his home, in spite of bein' alone. Always

in a hurry to get back to it, and never went on holiday as far as I remember for ten years or more."

She paused.

"But I was forgettin'. This way, sirs."

A well-kept, scrupulously clean house, with a lot of dusting and polishing expended on it and its contents.

A large hall and broad staircase gently curving up to the first floor. A graceful mahogany handrail topping fine wrought-iron bars. A grandfather clock steadily ticking, some brasses, a hall-stand, and beside it an old engraving of the interior of an office.

"That's the old bank that used to be here, sir. Pochin's Bank. That's a picture of what the dining-room used to look like . . ."

Quite unlike a modern bank. A large, comfortably furnished room, with contemporary figures perambulating and chatting together in the foreground. Behind them, two large desks at which clerks were sitting, one with a ledger, the other with cash and notes which he was handing to a dandy lolling in a chair nearby. A man in sober black with white linen and a wig, presumably the banker himself, amiably talking to another foppish man in a wig and holding two dogs on a lead.

"This is the room. Dr. Beharrell lived here all the time, dined, and did his work here, as well."

A vast room, changed, but still recognisable from the picture. It occupied the whole front of the house and there was a large open hearth with an unlit fire of logs in it. It was entered by descending a step and this gave the ornamental ceiling a lofty look and added dignity to the whole place. The tall white walls were covered on three sides in books. Mats on the parquet floor, and antique furniture, some of which must almost have been priceless.

"Most of the furniture was in the house when the doctor's grandfather bought it. I did hear it said that it went for a song in those days, but some of the offers Dr. Beharrell's had for it of late years . . . well . . . it's worth a fortune. Mr. Gralam, the antique dealer, two doors away, said it made his mouth water."

Chippendale and Sheraton cabinets and dining-furniture,

bookcases and cupboards. Pieces of Dresden, Bow and Chelsea china scattered about. Two antique wing arm-chairs before the fire. Littlejohn could imagine Beharrell, after his evening meal at the pedestal dining-table, adjourning to one of the chairs with a book, until a call from some patient or other disturbed his peace.

"The doctor was a recluse?"

"Yes. He never went far from home."

"Why?"

The old woman looked nettled, not at the question, but at the lack of a satisfactory answer.

"I really could never find out. I've been with him since 1941, after his wife left. He used to go out then. He even went on a holiday every year. I believe when his wife was here they did a lot of playin' bridge and visitin' friends. Then, all of a sudden, the doctor lost all interest. If he had to go out, he seemed to want to get back as soon as he could. He stayed in evry night readin' till past midnight. Sometimes, I'd hear him up in the night, too, walkin' about as though he couldn't sleep."

"When did this sudden change occur?"

"We had a burglary in 1948, and after that the doctor seemed scared."

"Did the burglars take anything?"

"No. That's the funny part about it all. Not a thing. And what if they *had* done? The stuff is insured. You'd have thought the doctor couldn't afford to replace anythin' that was stolen. Instead, he preferred to stay indoors. Perhaps it did do some good, after all. We'd two more attempts to burgle the place after that, but the doctor was in and disturbed whoevr it was . . . Mr. Gralam used to say the doctor was a proper burglar-alarm."

Littlejohn slowly filled his pipe and lit it.

"Tell me some more about these attempts to get in the place. What happened?"

"The first was, as I said, in 1948. Somebody got in through the basement. The doctor himself was out, but he had an assistant, Dr. Pine, livin' in. Deputy for Dr. Macfarlane, he was, while he was on holiday. I was out, as well. Dr. Pine heard somethin' fall in the cellar and shouted

down, askin' if it was me. Whoever was there took to his heels. But we found a broken window after."

"The police were told, of course?"

"No, sir."

"Why?"

"The doctor got quite annoyed when we talked of scndin' for the police. He said he didn't want the peace of the place disturbed by bobbies trampin' all over . . ."

She sighed.

"I wonder what he'd say if he saw it now"

"And the other two attempts?"

"Just the same, sir. One in 1950 . . . I remember it . . . In November. My sister had died and I'd just got back. Dr. Beharrell was out again. Somebody got in his bedroom, this time, and as he returned, he could see a dim light behind the blind. He went up and whoever it was ran along the landing and out at the little window and off at the back."

"Anything missing that time?"

"No, sir. He must just have got in when the doctor returned. He must have left a way of retreat. I was in my room and I was proper scared. I asked him to tell the police . . . In fact, I said I'd leave unless somethin' was done."

"And was it?"

"No, sir. The doctor stayed in more. In fact, unless his assistant was on holidays, he stopped takin' night calls at all. Said he wasn't up to it; he was getting older."

"He was only sixty when he died, they tell me."

"That's right. He'd got eccentric . . ."

"Did he get peculiar in any other way?"

"Not that I'd know. He seemed to get older and more nervy. He never seemed to get over the first robbery."

Littlejohn stood looking through the window into the square which had become the stage of the case on which he was now employed. The little garden surrounding the war memorial was full of old men again, smoking, chatting and enjoying the sunshine. A maid passed pushing a perambulator. A man with a dog . . . The vicar again, going home this time. A haunted looking man, the vicar, carrying some

burden about with him; lack of money, family troubles, or a professional secret locked in his mind.

"And the third robbery?"

"A month ago. We were all in bed. It was two o'clock. This time, there was an awful crash. It woke us all. The doctor was comin' up from the cellar when Dr. Macfarlane and me got up. Someone had tried to get in the basement again. The doctor had his revolver."

"What did he say?"

"He said it was the cat had upset a pile of old tins down there. I didn't believe him. The lock had been tampered with. I looked at it next day when the doctor was out. It's my opinion that somebody broke in down there again and the doctor didn't want me to know because I'd have left, and no arguin', if he hadn't told the police. As it was, he'd got up before us next mornin' and put the door right. He was quite a hand with woodwork tools. But I could see somethin' had been done at the lock. I know it had been forced and the doctor had disturbed the burglar once again."

"Were there any other robberies in the neighbourhood?"

"Not that I knew. There's nothing else to rob. Mr. Gralam at the antique shop has all his valuables in a modern safe. Then there's the barber's, the rooms let to lawyers and doctors, the hat shop . . . and the rest. They're not worth burgling. As much as the bargain if they have enough to pay the rent, some of them!"

"Have you any views on all these attempts?"

"Yes, I have. The doctor has a lot of valuable silver in these cases and cupboards. It's well known he has them. And who's to stop some of the local riff-raff having a try to get them."

She flung open one of the Chippendale cupboards and revealed a solid silver tea-set, coffee service, sugar basins, silver dishes and spoons.

"I said he ought to put them in the bank or tell the police. He never used them, but I had 'em to clean. It was silly of him."

All around them, the house was absolutely silent. Even their voices had a muffled sound.

"Tell me something about Dr. Beharrell. What did he look like?"

They had seen the body at the town morgue, but it gave no idea of the man who had died. The closed eyes, the bloodless features, the smashed head now bound up, they gave away nothing of Beharrell in life.

"He was a small man, sir."

Funny. Littlejohn had imagined the doctor to be tall and thin. But then he'd only seen the face and the bulge beneath the sheet which covered the body.

"Come in the next room . . . It's Dr. Macfarlane's sitting-room. He won't mind."

A small morning-room overlooking the back of the house. The old banking hall which Beharrell had used as his quarters, had filled most of the ground floor, and the banker's family must have used the first floor for entertaining, unless, of course, they converted the banking chamber for their social functions after business hours. The little den at the back had been a retiring-room, perhaps for private customers.

A cosy room which looked to be happily lived in. Books on the walls, mainly medical, an old comfortable armchair, a table, photographs of university groups, a bag of golf clubs . . . The study of a young man, an extrovert, exactly the opposite from Dr. Beharrell.

Over the fireplace, presumably thrust there because Beharrell didn't want it in his own room, was an oil portrait of the dead man himself. Head and shoulders, with thin, regular features, a long aquiline nose, a large, thin-lipped mouth, and eyes of a striking cornflower blue which seemed to follow you wherever you went. The white hair was worn rather long and brushed straight back in some disorder. A fastidious, thoughtful face, with a trace of hardness about it.

"He was a thin man and only stood about five feet eight. But his smallness didn't stop him bein' determined. Once he made up his mind, there was no movin' him. All the same, I'm sorry he's dead. It was a dreadful thing to do to him, who never did anybody any harm. On the contrary, he was a kind man considerin' how his wife treated him."

"What happened?"

"She ran away with an R.A.F. officer who used to come here. The doctor entertained a lot of them. There wasn't much to do in Caldicott, so he gave them open house. That was his reward for it. They went off and was never seen again."

"It made him a bitter recluse?"

"Not bitter. And he wasn't a recluse, as you call him, until a year or two after she left him."

"What could have happened to make him shut himself in his shell that way?"

"I don't know. You can say it was the burglars . . . But I think bein' on his own and broodin' and not knowin' what had become of his wife, made him odd. They do say he was terribly fond of her. She was a lot younger than him. He might have known somethin' of the kind would happen."

"Why? Had she a reputation for being flighty?"

"Oh, no. Don't run away with that idea. It was a shock to everybody. They say she seemed very fond of the doctor, too. But twenty years between them. It's not nacherall . . ."

Cromwell, silent, taking it all in, was looking through the window, which gave a view of a well-kept formal garden, with a lawn, a few apple trees, a flower-bed or two, a summer-house, and a lot of terra-cotta ornaments and pots sprouting geraniums and nasturtiums. In the middle of the lawn stood a fine wrought-iron wellhead.

"Is that a well, Mrs. Trott? It looks very pretty."

She joined Cromwell at the window.

"Yes. It takes a man all his time keepin' that place straight, but it's worth it. In full summer, with it all in bloom, it's a picture."

A walled garden, with, just visible over the wall at the end, the vast stretch of flat fen country also to be seen from the *Red Lion* through the gap in the buildings.

"Is there water in the well?"

"Yes. There was nearly a lawsuit about it some years ago. In 1947 . . . The corporation and Dr. Beharrell had a terrible row about it. He had to give in, though. His lawyers said he wouldn't stand a chance in court."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, there'd been a big building estate put up just outside the town. A new factory and the new R.A.F. station and what-not. What they didn't seem to think of when they built it was that the water supply here was only just enough to keep us all goin' . . . Then came the drought in 1947. We'd only a fortnight's supply left . . ."

"So they wanted to get it from the well, and the doctor objected?"

"That's about it. But it wasn't so easy. You see, in the old days the well supplied this house and the one next door, which also belongs to the doctor. The surgery and waitin' rooms are there. It's the oldest well for miles, and the best. It never dried up, however bad the drought. Then, when the pipe water came to Caldicott, it was no more use. The doctor had it filled in; he said it was deep and dangerous."

"When was this?"

"When he had the garden laid out in 1942 . . . It was a wilderness before, but the doctor had it turned over to grow vegetables and the like on account of the grow-your-own food drive. A few flower-beds, and the rest cabbages and such. After the war, he had a lawn and flowers instead."

"You'd have thought the well would have been useful for watering the vegetables."

"You would, wouldn't you? But the doctor said what with the gardener and other people potterin' about there, it wasn't safe. You see, there was only a little rim round it then and a big wooden lid . . . He got that fancy iron arrangement and had it put over, but he had the well filled in with stones and then concreted over the top."

"And what about the corporation?"

"In the drought things was well-nigh panic here. Then somebody remembered this well and the corporation sent some sort of official notice about tapping the spring and piping it off to a stand-pipe in the square. The doctor nearly went mad at the idea of disturbin' the garden again. It went on for weeks and meantime it started to rain and never stopped till they was prayin' the Lord to hold back the deluge where once they'd been prayin' for water."

"So, the well was left?"

"Oh, no. If you care to go and see, it's full of water

again. The doctor gave way and the corporation opened it up. The doctor supervised it all. Said he wasn't havin' his garden ruined. It was rainin' like mad all the time they were diggin' it out. But they kept on, because they said it might stop at any time and the reservoirs weren't half full enough for what they wanted. They've made a new reservoir and put up the rates since. So now the well's just doin' nothin' . . . ”

“ Much ado . . . ”

“ I beg your pardon? ”

“ Just thinking aloud . . . ”

“ Would you like to see the rest of the house? ”

They went upstairs, the high broad hall echoing to their footsteps, and looked at the other rooms. The police had been busy all over the place and Littlejohn had seen some of the photographs. The dead man's room, with the secret door still open. The plain wooden secret back stairs whieh the banker had long ago used to descend to his strong-rooin without anybody knowing . . . Littlejohn and Cromwell went down into the eellars, saw the open iron door, the bare strong-room with walls of blue hard briek, the iron chest in whieh had been found the notes of a bank whieh had failed more than a century ago. The entrance had been effected by someone, as described at the inquest. The police had searched for fingerprints and found none.

The cellars were large, but lighted by electricity. They were quite empty. Not even a bottle of wine or a heap of coal.

“ Where do you keep the coal and wines, Mrs. Trott? ”

She seemed surprised.

“ There's a coal-shed in the yard. The doctor said it was dangerous coming down for coal. The main steps are steep, too. The wine is in the cellar next door, such as there is. It's a proper wine cellar with racks. Better than this . . . ”

“ From outside, there seems to be a servants' basement, Mrs. Trott. ”

“ Yes . . . This part is at the back of the house. The pri-  
-vate stairs come down two storeys from the doctor's bed-  
-room. I always thought the door at the top had been

bricked up. It's quite dark up there, you see, and I never went up. They're too steep for me and I never had any head for heights. I thought the wardrobe on the other side was built in when they blocked up the door . . . ”

Another door in the far corner led to a small passagc at the end of which was an exit to the area which Littlejohn had seen in the square. To the right, another door led into a large room evidently the servants' quarters in the old days, with a small butler's pantry leading off it. Mrs. Trott indicated the area door.

“ That's where the burglars tried to get in twice. Once in, they could climb those stairs.”

She indicated another staircase, this time a strong one of stone.

“ It leads up behind the hall to a door in my room, which is the one opposite Dr. Macfarlane's under the stairs. The kitchens are on that side, too.”

“ And Doctor Macfarlane's bedroom is on the same floor as the one Dr. Beharrell used?”

“ Yes. Mine, too. We don't use the old servants' bedrooms now. They're full of all sorts of old junk. Come up and see, if you like.”

They climbed back into the doctor's bedroom and visited the others. It wasn't much use, but it gave an idea of the way Beharrell and his household had lived.

The attics were vast and had great roof-beams and skylights, through which the sun shone in bright rectangles and diffused light over the plain deal floors. They were full of all kinds of relics, which Beharrell must have found it hard to part with. Boxes, trunks, cases, bundles tied in paper and old sheets. Sporting guns, cavalry swords, old furniture. And in one corner the remnants of a nursery; rocking-horse, a child's chair, beads on a frame like an abacus . . .

“ But I thought there were no children, Mrs. Trott?”

“ There weren't. This used to be Dr. Beharrell's old nursery. He must have saved those for his own children. Instead of which . . . ”

She shrugged her shoulders.

A dead doctor, a dead house, a dead past . . .

Littlejohn felt a great wish to be in the sunshine with people living and moving around him.

They went down the long stairs again and into the fresh air.

## 5

## FRENCH PORCELAIN

*Back at four o'clock.*

The posteard bearing the notice was stuck on the glass panel of the shop door by a gelatine lozenge.

Cromwell and Littlejohn had turned left from Dr. Beharrell's in the hope of seeing the owner of the adjacent premises, Mr. Swithin Gralam, who kept the antique shop.

"He'll be across at the Guildhall," said a passer-by, a small, inquisitive man with a squint. "There's a meetin' of the town counell."

"Thank you."

The little man looked ready to open a conversation, but changed his mind and crossed to join his cronies on the seat near the war memorial. The main topic in this forum was obviously the case of Dr. Beharrell. You couldn't miss knowing it by the way the eyes of all the members followed Littlejohn round.

The square was more animated. Genteel old ladies in clothes slightly out of fashion were taking their afternoon strolls, a number of women had arrived and parked perambulators by the seats under the trees and were gossiping and knitting. Children were playing in the little garden round the bronze soldier, chasing one another up and down the gravel paths. On the metal scaffolding which surrounded the clock tower of St. Hilary's Church, two men were fitting in a segment of the dial to the discomfiture of the nesting jackdaws.

The church clock chimed and struck four. A few minutes later, the one over the Guildhall did the same. Littlejohn looked at his watch. Ten past . . . A group of men emerged from the Guildhall just as Littlejohn and Cromwell reached the door of the *Red Lion*. The little cross-eyed man from his pitch in the gardens, whistled to Littlejohn and pointed

to the knot of councillors, apparently to indicate that the civic gathering had finished.

The central figure of the party at the Guildhall looked up sharply, saw Littlejohn, excused himself to his companions, and hurried to join the Superintendent. He stretched out a plump hand.

"Superintendent Littlejohn? My name's Henry Percival. I'm Mayor of Caldicott. Welcome to our town, sir, and thank you for coming to assist the police on what must be a difficult case, I'm sure. If there's anything I can do to help, please let me know."

An obvious gasbag. And so tall and fat, that he looked quite unable to see his own feet and the ground they walked on. A smooth, round, self-indulgent face, and a silky voice with which he talked himself out of all his difficulties.

"Thank you, sir. It's very kind of you. Does Mr. Gralam happen to be in the group at the Guildhall door?"

"Yes. That's the one with the white hair and no hat. The rest are the Borough Surveyor, the Town Clerk, the Borough Treasurer. Like to meet them, Superintendent?"

Cromwell was smiling softly to himself at the thought of Old Uncle Tom Cobley and all, and the Mayor, catching his eye, coughed, reddened, and after that held a dislike for Cromwell, whom he described as "that cheeky feller from London."

"If I might just have a word with Mr. Gralam?"

"Of course . . . SWITHIN!"

Mr. Percival's loud unctuous voice caressed the square like a solemn fog-horn and Gralam and all the people sitting round looked up.

Mr. Percival indicated with a benign wave of a fat hand that the antique dealer was wanted. At the same time, the municipal motor-car, driven by the beadle, drew up to take the Mayor away.

"Swithin, this is Superintendent Littlejohn and he wants to have a word with you. I'll leave you together."

To tell the truth, Gralam and the Mayor were only on speaking terms on municipal matters. They were distant relatives and had quarrelled about the will of a maiden aunt. The Mayor was glad to enter his car and be removed

from the scene. He bade Littlejohn good afternoon and ignored Cromwell.

"What's the matter with Mister Mayor?"

Gralam was little and slightly built, with small hands and feet and a pale face with high cheek bones and a pointed chin. The finicky, fastidious type who might have been attracted to his trade out of artistic inclination rather than for profit, and who might find it difficult to part with any real masterpieces which came his way in the course of business. He had a good head of white hair and shrewd grey eyes which had the faintly sly look of one accustomed to summing up clients and assessing exactly how much they could pay for anything.

"You wanted me, Superintendent? I'm at your service. Like to come over to the shop?"

Under the watching eye of all the occupants of the square, the three men crossed to the antique shop and Gralam let them in.

A large light place in very good order. No junk littered about; it was, perhaps, kept in the store-rooms. Here there was carpet on the floor; tables, chairs, chests and commodes tastefully set out to show them at their best; cabinets of costly china along the walls. In the large windows a mahogany Sheraton writing-desk, four chairs of the same period, a wall-mirror to match. Gralam's name was well-known in collectors' circles, he did a large export trade with the U.S.A., and he was a skilled and business-like buyer. Looking round his shop, you got the impression that he had no time for vulgar human beings and their money, but was accumulating lovely things for their intrinsic beauty. All this got him good prices for whatever he sold.

"Sit down, please."

Gralam indicated a set of Queen Anne chairs upholstered in exquisite tapestry. Cromwell settled himself and looked nervously upwards at the massive lustre chandelier hanging over his head and hoped it wouldn't fall down upon him like the one in the *Phantom of the Opera*.

"These municipal meetings are a terrible bore. I only remain on the council to prevent them tearing down such beauty as remains in the town. This square, the old gas

lamps, the frontages of the houses . . . They'd pull them all down and build a lot of flats and offices if there wasn't somebody in authority to plead for them . . ."

He opened a Regency secretaire cabinet in plum-pudding mahogany and took out a whisky bottle and glasses.

"You'll join me?"

As he poured out the drinks, he talked. His voice was dry, and crackled as though the dust of his trade had dried him up.

"I suppose you wished to talk to me about my late neighbour, Dr. Beharrell?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good health . . . He had a house of priceless antiques. Family stuff mostly. His father and grandfather, although you might have called them quack doctors, married into good local families. I could never persuade Beharrell to sell a single piece of furniture. He'd rather have lit the fire with it than part with it. He was a natural hoarder. He knew the value of everything and clung to it. In a sense, it was the same with his wife. She was very beautiful. A collector's piece, in fact. My own late wife introduced her to Beharrell years ago. She was a local girl, much sought after by men of her own age, to say nothing of a number of elderly bachelors. Beharrell went mad about her and, having acquired her, proceeded to treat her like a precious jewel. He adored her, but kept her almost a prisoner in the house."

"Until in the end . . ."

Gralam closed one eye and admired the glint of the whisky in the cut glass of the tumbler.

"Until in the end, she could stand it no more. She wanted to be treated as flesh and blood, as a woman, not as a porcelain shepherdess."

He stabbed with his forefinger in the direction of a pair of brightly-coloured French vases round which were twined voluptuous figures, standing in a Chippendale cabinet.

"She ran away with a man of flesh and blood of her own age."

"And was never seen again."

"As you say, Superintendent, and was never seen again.

Nobody knows what became of them. Perhaps they are happy together somewhere . . . Perhaps they are in paradise together."

Littlejohn looked up sharply. "Meaning?"

"They may be dead. If they fled to London, they must have arrived there at the worst time of the bombing."

Gralam's eyes grew dreamy. He seemed to be far away.

"Can you tell us anything of Beharrell as a neighbour? Did you see much of him?"

"Before his wife ran away, we saw a lot of them both. My own wife was alive then. We belonged to the same set and gathered in someone or other's house every week. The black-out didn't break us up. For some time after Mrs. Beharrell went, her husband kept away; but he started turning up again. Naturally, we were all sorry for him and encouraged him. He seemed to be getting over it. Then, he suddenly changed and became a recluse. He shut himself up in that big house and didn't stir out except to attend to his practice."

"What was the cause, in your opinion, sir?"

Gralam stroked his chin and, crossing his legs, squinted at the shiny tips of his patent-leather shoes.

"It did seem to coincide with a burglar he had, but that is a stupid suggestion. After all, the place was insured. He wouldn't tell the police, either. He told nobody. Mrs. Trott let me know about it all. There were three attempts at robbery, all told. Surely, rather than keep house perpetually and become a prisoner of his own fears, a man would tell the police and relieve his feelings. It was his own business, but it seemed to me very idiotic at the time."

"Had he something very precious about the place that he didn't want disturbing or anyone to know about?"

Gralam gave Littlejohn a sly glance from the corner of his eye.

"I don't know."

"But you have your own ideas, sir?"

Another sidelong look.

"What makes you ask that?"

"Because you might be hiding something, too, like Beharrell did."

"I don't like that suggestion, Superintendent. I only have my own vague opinions. I think there was something, but I haven't a clue about it."

"The doctor owned his house and the one next door?"

"Yes. That's a bit unusual, but his grandfather bought both of them. The one next door was, I believe, a kind of hospital where patients were lodged by the bonesetters."

"May I ask if you own your own property, too, sir?"

Gralam smiled.

"No. This and all the other houses in the square, with the exception of Beharrell's two, belong to Vincent Pochin, the lawyer. He developed a mania for the antiquities of Caldicott and bought up all the properties here he could."

"That's a strange kind of hobby, isn't it?"

"His family were, in days past, prominent people in the town. They lived and kept a bank in the very house Beharrell owned. Funny, Vincent could buy every one of them except the family town-house."

"How long has he owned them?"

"He acquired them during the war . . . About 1943 or 1944. I was away at the time. The bottom fell out of the antique business and I closed down and got a job looking after the evacuated pictures and antiques of several of the London galleries and museums. I'd been here for twenty-five years before war broke out, but had always been the tenant of some old ladies who let the place to me. It had been the family residence of their ancestors, too. When I came back to Caldicott after the war, I found I'd a new landlord. The old ladies had died and Pochin had bought the property cheaply."

"And also the rest of the let property in the square?"

"Yes. Some of the owners died, others left the place, and in other cases, Pochin bought out mortgages and when the debtors couldn't keep up the payments owing to the war, he foreclosed and came into possession. Not a bad idea, because had some property developer or other got them, they might easily have been pulled down or mauled badly in the making of flats or offices."

Littlejohn lit his pipe and puffed it slowly and thoughtfully.

"Was your shop empty during the war, sir?"

"To all intents and purposes, yes. The W.V.S. ran a sort of depot here but very little went on. It was closed most of the time."

"When did Pochin acquire it?"

"In 1942, I think. Why?"

"I like to be precise about these matters. You were here in 1947, sir?"

"Yes."

Gralam raised his eyebrows, wondering what was coming next.

"Do you remember the drought and the bother about Beharrell's well?"

Cromwell found himself glowing with interest. The well, the strong-room, the ownership of all the houses in the square. What was the Superintendent up to, now?

"Yes, I remember it all. I was on the council and we had a devil of a job with Beharrell. He got so mad, that I imagined at one time he'd be prepared to stick to his guns and defend his property, even if he had to take a shotgun to anyone who intruded."

"And then he gave in."

"Yes. His resistance collapsed."

Again the sly sidelong look.

"But what has that to do with his death . . . his murder?"

"Nothing, really, sir. I'm just interested in the history of Dr. Beharrell, of Bank House, and this square. What exactly happened about the well?"

"There was a great water shortage and the water board bethought themselves of Beharrell's well, which, in the town archives, has always had the reputation of never drying up in any drought in memory. The board made an offer to buy and pipe water from the well. Beharrell had filled it in. Said it wasn't safe and too deep for a man's garden. The board pressed the matter, Beharrell refused, there was talk of a case at law and both sides had actually instructed solicitors."

"Who was pressing the matter from the board's point of view?"

"Several of us. I for one, thought it damn selfish of Beharrell when the whole town looked like being without water. It was like him, as I said. What he had, he kept."

"But who would you say, sir, was the driving force in the matter of the well?"

"Shillinglaw, the lawyer. He's Coroner, now, but in those days, he was solicitor to the council and water-board."

"He is also a member of the Pochin firm of lawyers and brother-in-law of the two Pochins?"

"You seem to know quite a lot for such a short stay, Superintendent. Yes, you're right."

"And then, you say, the dootor suddenly caved in."

"Yes; when he knew he was likely to lose the case. The board would have applied for, and got, a compulsory purchase order."

"And Beharrell made no more trouble?"

"He was a bit of a nuisance to the workmen when they opened up the well again. I was chairman of the surveyor's committee of the town council and water board at the time. I got reports on the jobs and among them was the well project.

"The foreman of the digging party was quite mad about it. Beharrell stopped them working a time or two. Said it wasn't convenient. He'd either patients about or guests, or something. I forget the details. But three times, he drove them off. However, that was a small matter considering he'd agreed to our using the well. We didn't need it, after all. It rained like hell as soon as we started to dig, and kept it up for four months. We were afraid in the end we'd be flooded out. I remember the foreman saying the well had brought us all nothing but a lot of trouble, humbug, and bad luck."

A bracket clock chimed half-past four and from the school behind the church, emerged a swarm of eager, running children on their ways home. The inmates of the memorial gardens had gone off for their teas and, on the terrace of the *Red Lion*, Mrs. Hope was serving afternoon tea to a commercial traveller, who was sitting entering up his sales on a table shaded from the sun by a striped parasol. He raised his head from his labours, started at the sight of

the landlady, smiled at her, and gobbled her up with his eyes.

Long shadows were beginning to fall across Upper Square, and the brightness of the early day, which had livened up the old buildings, was now replaced by an evening melancholy which brought with it a sinister chill, as though the evil spirits of the place were eagerly waiting to take possession after dark.

"You mentioned earlier, Mr. Gralam, some other bachelors who might gladly have married Mrs. Beharrell, had the doctor not won her for himself. Who were they?"

A pause, as though the antique dealer were making up his mind whether or not to disclose the information and deciding what its implications might be.

"They've all gone now. Some have died; others left the town. The Pochin brothers are all that remain. They were rivals. Vincent never married. He's really not the marrying sort. His wooing could hardly be described as masculine. It had an old-world grace about it. He just hung around, adoring her, and now and then he'd show off like a small boy. His brother, Sam, was even worse. But Sam got over it. He's quite a clever man, is Sam. He's a great collector of old firearms. The attic above their offices is full of a collection of all kinds. Old pistols, blunderbusses, flintlocks . . . I'd say it's as valuable and comprehensive as any private collection in the country. He's even got some kegs of old black gunpowder there and tries them out now and again to see how they work. He's written a book on old firearms . . . But there I go . . . Riding my antique hobby-horse again . . . Sam's a bachelor, too."

"Do he and Vincent live together?"

"Yes. They have a flat over the office in the square and a rambling old house a few miles out on the Staunton Road, where they live with their old mother. She's eighty or more."

"What type of men are they?"

"Vincent's a bit of a spoiled child, even if he is nearly sixty. I believe he was a weakly youngster and they did everything for him. A sheltered type, who's never been good for much work. A dilettante . . . a poser . . . Sam, who's

about two years older than him, carries on the family law practice with Shillinglaw, their brother-in-law. Sam's a good lawyer. Not much in court, of course . . . Too retiring and modest. But a good adviser, if you understand what I mean. There is a legend, however, about a time or two when Sam appeared in court when Shillinglaw had an operation and Sam took his place. He was brilliant and took the court's breath away. So, it appears that it's indolence, not lack of skill, that keeps him from pleading."

"What does Vincent do with all his time, then?"

"Goes to the office and pretends to work, I suppose. It's a good practice and he probably gets a good share of the takings. Sam will see to that. He's always looked after Vincent like a father. Vincent must arouse his protective instinct."

"What was Mrs. Beharrell's maiden name?"

"Grace Brodribb. She came from Peterborough, and was a relative of my late wife's. Did I tell you before? H'm . . . She came to stay with us for a while after her father died. She caused quite a sensation locally, I can assure you. That's a long time ago."

He rose.

"I close at five and it's getting time to lock up the valuable pieces. I have a safe in which I put the silver and precious china. One never knows. One day some burglar who's also a connoisseur might break in."

"Did you know about the ancient safe in Beharrell's cellar?"

"Yes. I think it must have been Poehin once told me. It was there in the days of Pochin's Bank, I hear it had been broken into when Beharrell died. That wouldn't be a difficult job, if what I hear is the truth. Pochin once described it to me. In the old days I guess it kept valuables safe. Nowadays . . ."

Graham tended to ramble on in his talk, especially when it came to discussing anything antique.

"Whoever broke in the safe didn't get much, sir. It only contained a lot of old notes issued by a bank which suspended payment more than a century ago. That is, unless the intruder took away something else with him. The notes

were in an inner coffer which hadn't been opened, apparently. There was nothing else there."

"It was a funny business . . ."

Gralam began to gather together the silver and placed it on a table ready for stowing away. Then, the small china figures. He handled them all delicately as though he loved them, stroking them almost voluptuously and fingering their delicate glaze and modelling like an expert savours fine wines.

"What was Mrs. Beharrell like, sir? Was she a bit flighty?"

Gralam stood like someone transfixated for a minute.

"Not flighty. I wouldn't say that. But, I told you, he kept her pent up. A bird is bound to beat the bars of its cage and long for the fresh air. However loving and tame, it's bound to do that, isn't it?"

"And you would, in a way, agree that she was right in taking to her wings and flying off with the first man who offered her freedom."

Gralam's skin was like parchment, but slowly the colour of blood suffused it and he gradually grew hot and flushed.

"You'll bear in mind, Superintendent, that Grace was, in a sense, a member of my family . . . or, at least, my wife's. I would be the last to condone such an irregularity. Even after she married, men flattered her and paid court to her. It used to madden Beharrell. I've seen him hurry her off home early in quite a tantrum because some man or other who's happened to be at a house party, has been smitten by Grace's beauty, and couldn't leave her alone. It tended to make Beharrell take her out less and keep her more to himself."

"In his later days, were there any other women in Beharrell's life, sir?"

Another significant pause. Gralam seemed to smile at his own thoughts.

"There were one or two . . . You can't blame him, can you? Cooped up there on his own, with only his thoughts for company. His fancy was bound to stray now and then and perhaps lead him into temptation."

"What do you mean?"

Cromwell looked up at Littlejohn. There was a harsh note in the Superintendent's voice, as though he sensed and disliked Gralam's murky imagination.

"There were rumours about certain women. Even gossip about marriage. Madame Alcardi, for example . . ."

"*Bel canto?*"

"Someone has already told you?"

"No. I remember seeing her plate on the door earlier today."

"She's a fine-looking woman. Her husband died in an internment camp in the war. Italians. Beharrell was seen calling there after dark sometimes."

"He might have been interested in *bel canto*! Or she could have been a patient."

"She *could*. However . . . There was a minor scandal brewing, I think, at the time of Beharrell's death. Mrs. Hope, at the *Red Lion* across the way. They were too fond of one another and it was getting about. Hope picked her up when he was Beharrell's chauffeur. He and Beharrell were on holiday together in France and . . . well . . . if you ask me, they *both* brought her home. Only Hope didn't know at the time. The pair settled down at the hotel. It was convenient for Beharrell. That's my theory, at any rate."

"You think Hope might have been involved in the doctor's death, then?"

"I never said so. George couldn't murder a fly. A spiritless, drunken little cuckold."

Another pause. Gralam began to take the porcelain shepherdesses from their ease.

"You didn't answer the other question, sir. What was Mrs. Beharrell like?"

Gralam halted, one of the figures in his hand. He caressed it gently. A vase, with foliage exquisitely modelled on it. And sitting beneath the arbour of leaves, two naked women, one with her arm round the younger girl. The elder looked out at the world with a clear innocent expression. The antique dealer ran his fingers down the gracious moulded arm, the flanks, the legs, to the swan reclining idly at their feet. Then he caressed the head and the sharply pointed breasts.

"She was like this figure . . . Brown hair which shone like copper when the light caught it."

His body stiffened as though in a spasm of pain, and his fingers grew rigid, lost their grip. The figure fell to the ground and smashed into a dozen pieces.

"Are you all right, sir . . . ?"

Gralam sat on one of the Queen Anne chairs.

"Yes . . . Don't worry. I get these little turns. It's angina. I have to be careful. Stupid of me . . ."

"Can I get you anything?"

Gralam grew irritable.

"No, no. I tell you I'm all right."

He turned to Cromwell, who was picking up the pieces of the shattered vase.

"You needn't bother, Cromwell. I'll shovel them up. Don't worry . . ."

He paused and then spoke in almost a snarl.

"You think it was exquisite, don't you? A shame to smash it, even by accident. You needn't bother. It was a fake . . . Just a sham."

Littlejohn didn't believe him.

## 6

## THE LOST RIVER

At the rear of the Guildhall at Caldicott there is a huge cobblestoned area, enclosed by brick walls, topped with broken glass bottles, and locked every night behind large iron gates. It goes by the name of the Town's Yard, and it is the headquarters of the surveyor's department.

Cromwell rang the bell at the window of a small gatehouse marked *Enquiries. Ring*. An old man with one arm opened the window and without speaking raised questioning eyebrows.

"Could I speak to Mr. Charlie Baldry, please?"

Littlejohn had asked the sergeant to make this visit. He was intrigued by the story of the well in Beharrell's garden, and the man to throw some light on the matter might be the foreman of the digging-party which had opened it up again during the water shortage. Plumtree, very surprised at the turn of events, had supplied all the necessary information. The foreman's name was Charlie Baldry, who worked like a black, drank like a fish, and had eleven grown-up children. He also was the snooker champion of the corporation staff, had once won five hundred pounds in a football pool, and if there was any more information which Cromwell needed, would he kindly name it and Plumtree would do his best to oblige.

Meanwhile, Littlejohn had gone to the office of Pochin, Shillinglaw and Pochin to see Mr. Vincent Pochin.

"I wonder if he'll still be wearing his yellow gloves," said Cromwell as they parted.

"Charlie Baldry?" said the man at the enquiry office. "He's not won another football pool, has he?" And he seemed to lose all enthusiasm when he learned that it was only the police who wanted to speak to the lucky man.

"You'll be lucky if he 'asn't packed up and gone. There's

a cup-tie replay on tonight between Caldicott Central and Staunton United. Charlie's a big supporter of the Central, same as I am myself . . . Are you goin' . . . ?"

"No."

"Oh . . ."

The gate-keeper gave Cromwell a look of contempt.

"Well . . . If he's not gone, you'll like as not find Charlie in the pavin' office. They're goin' to take up Sheep Street and cover it with asphalt and Charlie's workin' out what it'll cost with the borough surveyor, ready for the next finance meetin'. You go right across the yard to that wood hut opposite . . . You'd better sign the book before you go in. It's against the reg'lations to go in the yard without signin' up."

Cromwell dashed his signature in the visitors' book with a flourish and went on his way.

Acres of paving-stones, old and new, cobblestones, bricks, tar-boilers, steam-rollers rusting because the town now used diesels, dust-carts, watering-carts, suction vehicles for emptying street-grids, piles of old gas lamps just where they'd left them when they turned to electricity . . . And a square, stone building with the word *Mortuary* chiselled over the doorway. Finally, the paving office. Cromwell knocked on the door. "Come in," shouted a ripe, fruity voice.

Charlie Baldry was a portly, medium-built man with a bald head, a heavy moustache, and a large beery nose. He was alone and stood at a high desk making laborious calculations on bits of paper and grunting noisily as he did so.

"Hello," he said in a most friendly voice. "Are you the man from the Trinchomalee Asphalt Company?"

Cromwell replied he was sorry, but he wasn't.

Mr. Baldry seemed sorry, too.

"Never mind. It's too late now to be botherin' about asphalt. I'm just ready for off to the cup-tie replay. Are you goin'?"

"No. I'm sorry, but I can't. I'm from Scotland Yard and I'm here on the Beharrell murder case. It's keeping me busy."

Mr. Baldry looked sympathetic.

"I'm sure it is. It must be a big worry to you. But where do I come in?"

He swept a lot of papers from a chair and invited Cromwell to sit down, and then thrust his own calculations away in a drawer and put on his cap, just to indicate politely that he wasn't going to stay there much longer.

Cromwell passed his cigarettes to Mr. Baldry, who accepted one and offered Cromwell a light from a petrol-lighter almost as large as a miner's lamp.

"Where do I come in? I know nothin' about the murder, though I must say I 'opc you catch and 'ang who done it. I was very fond of Dr. Beharrell. I owed 'im a lot. My wife wouldn't 'ave been alive but for 'im."

"He was a good doctor?"

"One of the best. We've a large family . . . Five girls and six boys, all grown up an' married now, except the youngest, as is courtin' strong and likely to get wed soon. That's not countin' the two boys we buried. The last three caused a lot of trouble when they were on the way. Twice, we thought my missus would 'ave died in childbed, but Dr. Beharrell saved 'er. A fine man, and I'd 'ave done 'im a good turn any time . . ."

Cromwell had had enough of Mr. Baldry's family troubles and obstetrics and thought it time to chip in.

"I mustn't keep you from your football, Mr. Baldry. But I called to ask you a thing or two about the well behind the doctor's house."

Mr. Baldry thumped the table with his huge fist and laughed hoarsely.

"The well! Of course. I'd forgotten all about that affair."

His face grew serious and he leaned earnestly towards Cromwell.

"You don't mean to say that that well's anythin' to do with the murder of the doctor?"

"No. We're going into past history about the doctor and his house. Just a bit of background, you know. The more we find out about the environment and life of the victim in cases like this, the more we're likely to discover about who might have killed him."

Mr. Baldry eyed his visitor with admiration, his dark eyes under thick bushes of eyebrows wide with wonder.

"Oh . . . Yes, I see. Environment and life. I see. It's amazing what science can do nowadays, isn't it? And the well comes in it, does it?"

"In a way. You were in charge of opening it up again after the doctor had had it filled in, weren't you, Mr. Baldry?"

Mr. Baldry nodded sagely, and then removed his cigarette, flicked off the ash, put it in his mouth again, and spoke round it.

"Yes. But let's get it all clear first, Mr. Cromwell. Let's get it all clear. What 'ave you been told already about it?"

"Just that in the drought of 1947, the water board had the idea of re-opening the well and getting supplies from it, but the doctor objected until he found he could be forced to give way. Then they allowed you to get on with the job. I did hear, too, that the doctor was a bit obstructive."

In the course of this recital Mr. Baldry's lips drew tighter and tighter and he grew more and more annoyed until he couldn't remain silent any more.

"I don't know 'oo told you that cock-and-bull story. Was it that Trott woman? It's jest all poppycock. This is what really 'appened . . ."

Mr. Baldry looked at the office clock, an alarm variety which stood on a shelf and furiously punctuated all that was being said by an incessant tick-tack.

"I've jest seven minutes before I must go. I always 'ave a pint on my way out, at the *Merry Waggoners*, and I 'ope you'll do me the honour of joinin' me, Mr. Cromwell."

"The pleasure's mine and the drinks on me."

"We won't quarrel on that score. Well . . . It was this way. I must first explain that there are two underground streams run under Caldicott. Lost rivers, as you might say. We knew of their existence, Mr. Cromwell, but not havin' much use for them, we neglected them and we lost them. See? They changed their courses and when we tried to get at 'em from the old maps when the drought was 'cre, we found they'd gone . . . Jest vanished."

He waved his arms about like a conjurer making things disappear.

"Now . . . Follow me closely . . . Now, it was recorded that the old well in Dr. Beharrell's garden was right on the course of one o' them rivers, the River Cockle it's called on the old maps. We tried borin' in other places without success and then we thought of the doctor's well and asked if we might open it up and explore . . . The doctor played merry 'ell and said he wasn't 'avin' his back garden ruined. It was a bit embarrassin' for me, I can tell you, Mr. Cromwell. I owed the doctor a lot for what he'd done for the missus, yet 'ere was the water board goin' to make an issue of openin' up the well. Bit awkward, eh?"

"Very."

"Eventually, it was me that settled it all. There was talk of a law case about it, when I thought I'd do my best to prevent things bein' awkward for the doctor. I called one night. I told 'im that I would be in charge of the operations, so to speak, and I'd see to it that it was done neat and proper and no disturbance or fuss."

Mr. Baldry offered Cromwell a small cigarette from a soft packet and lit it for him.

"We'd no idea of startin' a sort of waterworks in the doctor's back garden. We just wanted to open the well, clear out the old bricks and rubble the doctor had filled it up with, then drive down a borehole to see if the stream or spring was still there. Then, we'd have 'ad some idea of the direction of the old river and put up a pump and pumping station at the nearest convenient place. That was all."

"The doctor agreed?"

"Yes, after I'd told 'im we'd cause no trouble. He did say that we'd 'ave to pack up now and then and suspend operations if it wasn't convenient for us to be there. I said that 'ud be all right and I'd see it was done."

"And that ended it?"

Mr. Baldry hesitated and Cromwell thought he saw a look of doubt and then cupidity come in his eyes.

"Yes, that was all," he said hastily. The sergeant got a vague idea that Mr. Baldry had something on his mind.

He seemed to be sizing Cromwell up, wondering if he were friend or foe.

Finally he rose ready for off.

"It avoided a rather awkward situation, too. You see, Mr. Shillinglaw, the lawyer, was solicitor to the water board and 'is partner, Mr. Vincent Poehin, was Dr. Beharrell's lawyer. If there'd bin a law case, it would've been a bit queer, one partner on the one side and the other on the other. Brothers-in-law, too . . . I suppose lawyers do get such funny sitchewations and are slippery enough to get out of them. Well, what about our pint o' beer together, Mr. Cromwell?"

"With pleasure . . ."

Mr. Baldry clocked-out at the gatehouse and led the sergeant across the way to a working-class pub round the large counter of which a number of workmen, presumably from the corporation yard, were drinking pints of beer in glass tankards. It was a warm evening and Cromwell grew thirsty at the sight of them.

"Evenin', Charlie."

A number of men who were greeted back by Mr. Baldry as Percy, Alt, Edgar, Len and Ted, gave Cromwell searching looks and wondered who he was. The sergeant was wearing his bowler and they guessed he might be a traveller for tar, paving-stones, gravel, or asphalt, or else one of the directors of the rival team visiting the town for the football replay.

"Well, Charlie, I guess Central 'ave 'ad it tonight."

Charlie ignored this piece of treachery.

"Two pints of bitter, Blanche."

The blonde barmaid handed out the drinks, giving Cromwell a flashing smile and a careful scrutiny as she did so. Then Charlie flung his bombshell.

"Allow me to introduce to you Detective-Sergeant Cromwell, of Scotland Yard, who's 'ere on the Beharrell case."

There was a hush as the men looked with awe on Charlie and his new pal. Then they all shook hands with him. Cromwell stood pints all round. Percy, Alt and Edgar next paid in turn for pints, and Len and Ted were dying to do

the same, when the clock struck half-past five. The kick-off was at six.

"Here," said Mr. Baldry, settling his cap on his head. "They kick-off in half an hour. This means I'll 'ave to go straight from 'ere to the field. No tea, and I shan't be able to 'ave a proper wash and brush up . . ."

He turned to Cromwell with a very warm-hearted look and the sergeant, feeling the same way himself, nodded agreeably.

"I say, Mr. Cromwell, as you are the cause of me bein' late, what about comin' with me to the match? I'm sure your boss'll let you off if you telephone 'im. All work an' no play makes Jack a dull boy. If you don't come, I shall take it very much amiss."

Cromwell hesitated. The beer and the good company of Percy, Alt and the rest had undermined his resistance and he inwardly told himself that this might also be in the line of duty. Didn't Littlejohn always believe in getting the atmosphere of the place and the people on a case? Well . . .

"If the missus plays merry 'ell because I've not been 'ome to my tea before goin' to the match, I can say I met a friend and we went there together."

The large black eyes under the bushes of eyebrows pleaded hard and Cromwell gave way.

"All right. I'll ring up the boss, then. There's a 'phone here, is there?"

"Tha's right. We'll have a wash first, then we'll have a couple of meat pies and a pint o' beer, just to keep away the pangs o' hunger, and after that we'll go an' watch Central knock 'ell out of Staunton. Come on."

They had the tiled lavatories of the pub to themselves and sluiced themselves with water and cleaned themselves up. Here it was that Mr. Baldry, convinced by beer and fellowship that Cromwell was a jolly good sort, came out with his final confidence.

"One thing I didn't mention across at the office, ole chap. It was a bit awkward and I was a bit embarrassed on account of a promise I made to Dr. Beharrell. Now he's dead and gone, so I don't suppose the promise is bindin' any more."

He looked ready to shed a tear or two for the dead doctor.

"In the course of our talk together about the well, the doctor up and asked me if I'd do him a favour. 'Anythin', doctor,' I sez. 'I owe you a good turn, sir, and you've on'y got to mention it.' Then, he asks me a funny thing. Well, it seemed funny at the time, but thinkin' it over, for a doctor, p'rhaps it wasn't so funny after all."

Mr. Baldry drew close to Cromwell and imparted his secret in a hoarse whisper.

"'Baldry,' says the doctor, 'you might find somethin' queer when you get to the bottom of that well.' 'Wot might that be, sir?' I asks. 'Bones,' he sez. 'Bones?' I sez, surprised like. 'Yes, Baldry,' sez the doctor. 'You see, in my student days I 'ad a skeleton in connection with my studies, which I kept in the lumber room for a long time. Then, when I was doin' a bit of clearin' up, I decided to throw a lot of stuff away. I put the rest in the dustbin, but I couldn't hardly put the skeleton in, could I, Baldry?' I admitted he couldn't without causin' a hell of a lot of fuss among the dustmen. 'So, I jest chuck'd 'im down the well, Baldry.' I said if I found it, I'd give it back to him to dispose of elsewhere. 'Don't let anybody see you, Baldry. You promise that?' I knew 'ow awkward it would be if I was seen with a lot of yewman bones, so I promised."

Cromwell put on his hat to show he was ready for off and to hide his excitement.

"And you found the skeleton?"

"Yes. It was at the bottom of the well, as the doctor had said. One of the men found the first bone, a femur, it was. I know such things, you see, Mr. Cromwell. I did me first-aid course for am'blance work in the war. It was about dinner-time when the first bone came up. So I sent the men off for their grub while I dug up the rest myself. A whole skeleton, except for the small bones of the hands and feet and one or two of the little vertebrae of the spine. It was a bit of a job, I'll tell you. As a rule, skeletons like that are wired together. We used one at our first-aid course. This one wasn't. It came up bone by bone. I got 'em all in the surgery on the q.t. The doctor was in alone, so I left 'em

with 'im. Skeleton of rather a biggish man, I'd guess."

"How did you know that?"

"As I said, I was trained in physiology for me first-aid. I got used to the size of skeletons. We'd four of 'em at the hospital. This was a biggish man's, or I'm a Dutchman."

"That was all you found?"

"Yes. We emptied the old well and found nothin' more of any importance. It's time we was off . . ."

Cromwell telephoned to Littlejohn at the office of Pochin, Shillinglaw and Pochin, where he knew his chief had gone. He found the Superintendent still there and told him the true story of Beharrell's well and the contents dug up from it.

"Good!" came the reply. "I'll see you later. Don't wait for me if I'm not back when dinner's ready."

"I wondered if you'd mind my taking an hour or two off. Baldry, who gave me all the information about the well, is a supporter of the local football eleven, and it's a cup-tie replay. He wants me to go with him as a sort of *quid pro quo* for what he's told me."

"Of course. Go and enjoy yourself. By the way, where are you speaking from?"

"The *Merry Waggoners*, just behind the Guildhall, sir."

"I thought so! Well, thanks again, old chap, and enjoy your football match."

Caldicott Central won 4-3, by a last minute goal, and Cromwell, somehow mixed up with Mr. Baldry, Percy, Alt, Edgar, Len and Ted in a celebration, arrived home in a taxi at ten o'clock, and went straight up to bed.

## 7

## THE LAWYER'S HOUSE

IT was after five and late for a visit to a professional man's office when Littlejohn crossed the square to the house bearing the brass plate of Pochin, Shillinglaw and Pochin.

Empty of all its idlers and the children of the nearby school, Upper Square was strangely quiet. The sun was sinking behind the tall houses and a wind had started to shake the trees. Mrs. Hope had taken in the striped parasols and check tablecloths of the terrace of the inn, and the only cheerful thing about the square was the cries of the blackbirds and thrushes, digging for worms in the memorial garden or shouting belligerently from the branches which they claimed for their own.

The vicar was standing on the scaffolding which surrounded the church clock, holding on his hat, examining the progress of the work on the dial.

Littlejohn entered the general office of the lawyer's house. It was the first room on the right and the place was much shabbier and smaller than the doctor's. Worn linoleum on the floor, soiled walls painted in dismal dark green, three old desks, and a lot of cheap bare chairs scattered about. Most of the staff had gone home. A small junior clerk with his hair plastered down with brilliantine, was busy with the post, putting on stamps, sealing letters, and dropping blobs of sealing wax on the registered mail. He seemed surprised to see the late caller.

"Is Mr. Vincent Pochin in?"

The boy breathed on a brass seal, impressed it on the wax of an envelope, whipped it away again, and seemed very satisfied with his handiwork.

"You're lucky. He's in the flat. The others have gone."

"Will you tell him I'm here, please?"

"O.K. What name?"

"Superintendent Littlejohn."

The boy dropped the seal on the floor, retrieved it in confusion, backed away a pace, and then scurried through the door.

"Certainly, sir. Will you just wait a minute, please?"

There was a smell of old parchment, hot sealing wax and floor polish about the room. The windows needed cleaning and the view of the square through the glass was misty and distorted.

The junior clerk was back.

"He's upstairs, sir. The room at the front at the top of the stairs."

The boy was eager to get to the football match and returned to his job. Littlejohn went to find Pochin himself.

The hall was a large one, like Bcharrell's, with the same arrangement of doors and stairs. The broad, shallow steps, graceful handrail, high ornamental ceiling, but ill-kept and shabby. On the first landing, however, the scene changed. A carpet on the floor, red and with deep pile, the heavy old mahogany doors polished and shining; even the glass door-knobs were elegant.

Pochin was standing waiting for Littlejohn at the door of the front room. He held out his hand.

"Glad you've called, Superintendent. Come in."

The lawyer was wearing the tweed suit in which Littlejohn had first seen him. Highly-polished brown shoes, spotless linen with an easy-fitting soft collar, and a canary-coloured foulard tie. The same long cigarette-holder in the corner of his mouth.

The room was large and occupied the whole front of the house. A fire of logs was burning on the hearth. A tall ornamental ceiling from which swung a big gilt chandelier.

The sudden change from the shabby decrepitude of the room below surprised Littlejohn. Instead of the musty damp of the office, here was a soft warmth, luxury, and good taste. The floor was of polished oak parquet, with expensive squares of Persian carpet flung about it, and the tall white walls were covered half way in books. The space above the books held a number of modern pictures. Harsh landscapes, fantastic still lifes, and some geometrical daubs

which looked like exhibits from an infants' school. Everything in perfect harmony, nevertheless.

"Sit down, Superintendent. Whisky? Cigar?"

They were all there on a lovely mahogany sofa-table. Drunks, cigars, cigarettes, and tobacco in a blue Delft jar. New books in publishers' jackets . . . Difficult to think of the seedy quarters below existing under the same roof. Pochin was obviously a connoisseur with money to spare for his fancies.

"Or perhaps you prefer your pipe?"

Pochin pushed across the tobacco jar and Littlejohn began to fill his pipe with the mixture, which was obviously an expensive and special one. Probably sent from a London tobacconist labelled 'Mr. Pochin's Mixture.' The lawyer crossed to a Regency cabinet and took out a silver tray, a cut-glass bottle of whisky, and crystal goblets, all of which sumptuously reflected the firelight. He sat down in an arm-chair on the opposite side from Littlejohn, mixed two drinks and passed one over. He pushed forward a little mahogany wine-table to hold the glass. Everything there, expensive and to hand. There seemed some kind of pose in it all, as though Pochin had in his mind a prototype whom he imitated to the letter. Littlejohn noticed now the slabby softness of Pochin's physique. In this self-indulgent atmosphere, he wasn't a bit surprised at it.

"We are very fortunate in having you on the case. The ordinary police would soon have been out of their depth, you know."

"*We* are the ordinary police, sir."

Pochin didn't seem to mind the correction. He shrugged his shoulders. "You know what I mean, Littlejohn. This isn't an ordinary case."

"I appreciate that. The very fact that we were warned that the crime had been committed before anybody found the body . . ."

"You were warned that it had occurred?"

"Yes."

Littlejohn took out the three untidy bits of paper from his wallet and passed them across to Pochin, who fingered them gingerly.

"Any idea who sent them?"

"No."

"No fingerprints or anything? Nothing your scientific experts could fasten on to?"

"No."

In the deep armchair, with the costly tobacco smoking in rich blue curls, the superb whisky, the atmosphere of comfort and refinement, it was difficult to set about dragging out family secrets, those of the town and square, the foibles and pcccadillos of the dead man, the life he lived.

"I see you like this room, Superintendent. My brother and I use it when we stay in town. Our place is five miles out. It is convenient to have a little *pied-à-terre*. We spend the night here now and then. There are bedrooms at the back and the housekeeper attends to us."

Pochin, too, seemed unwilling to talk about the local tragedy. As though something might come to light which would disturb his peace, his finicky self-indulgence, this little sybarite's retreat overlooking the quiet square where his whole life and history seemed to lie.

The lawyer handed back the scraps of paper.

"They convey nothing to me, either."

He looked hard at Littlejohn, who didn't reply, but carefully returned them to his pocket-book.

"This is, I presume, a professional call? I wish it weren't. You and I could enjoy an evening together, I'm sure, Superintendent. We seem to have tastes in common. Comfort and good things, for example."

The blue eyes searched Littlejohn's face as though Pochin were eager for his companion to start a conversation on any tack other than that of Beharrell's murder.

"Tell me something about Beharrell, sir. You were his lawyer and have grown up in the town with him."

Pochin stretched out his long legs to the fire. Outside, the wind was increasing and shaking the trees, a breeze sweeping the vast plain which surrounded this dying little town.

"You're right. I've known Beharrell since we were boys. There were long gaps in our association. I went to public school, he to the local grammar school and then to medical school in London."

"He was a normal type of fellow in those days?"

"Yes . . . A bit of a recluse, a bookworm, who didn't go much in company . . ."

"Until he married?"

A pause. The logs crackled in the grate and Pochin ejected the spent cigarette from his holder, replaced it by another, and lit it.

"That's right. He became much more sociable then."

"You knew his wife very well, sir?"

"Grace Brodribb? Yes, I did."

"May I ask a very personal question without running the risk of being impertinent? Were you very fond of her before she married?"

Pochin remained perfectly calm; too calm. His voice was icy as he replied.

"Is such a question necessary in the course of your enquiry, Littlejohn? I would have thought . . ."

"I wouldn't have asked if it hadn't been necessary, sir. I want to know all about Beharrell, his wife, his friends, everything. This isn't a normal case of clues, fingerprints, chemical tests, or alibis. The solution lies, I believe, in this square, where Beharrell's life was spent and where all his friends, and perhaps his enemies, lived most of their time."

"Very ominous and dramatic, I must say. May I ask if you suspect me . . . or anyone else, yet, Littlejohn?"

"No."

Another pause.

"I'm not afraid to confess that I asked Grace Brodribb to marry me. So did a few other men of our little circle. She seemed to prefer Beharrell from the very first. She told me at the time, they were soon to announce their engagement."

"What kind of a husband was Beharrell? Jealous, kindly, complacent, neglectful . . . ?"

Pochin smiled to himself.

"Kindly, yes. Jealous, yes. Neglectful, no. Complacent . . . that suggests that his wife wasn't to be trusted?"

"Well, sir, was she? She ran away with another man."

"It was Beharrell's fault. Grace was twenty years younger

than he was. At first, they got about a lot in their own circle . . .”

Their own circle. It kept cropping up. First from Gralam, now from Pochin. The little circle of Upper Square.

“Grace was charming and lovely. It was natural that the men should be gallant and attentive. Not that she encouraged them unduly. But a charming woman needs admiration. You’ll agree, I’m sure. Beharrell resented it. He even took her home early on one pretext or another. He grew so jealous that he began to keep Grace like a bird in a cage. She must have been stifled in that great house with her husband and his books and his patients. When Cranage came along . . .”

“Cranage?”

Pochin brushed the question away with an impatient gesture, as though it were interrupting his pleasant thoughts.

“Cranage was an air-force officer the Beharrells befriended. There were a lot of them in the Caldicott neighbourhood in the war and we did our best to entertain them. Cranage was a tall, well set-up, handsome fellow. In his uniform he must have made us middle-aged old buffers look poor . . . She fell under his spell . . .”

“And they ran away and were never seen again.”

No reply. The whole thing was a repetition of Gralam’s story. The two men might have compared notes and hatched out their account of the love affair and elopement of Grace Beharrell. And neither of them seemed to blame her. Beharrell was at fault.

“Did anyone try to trace the pair of them, sir? It couldn’t have been all that difficult. The war restricted people. They couldn’t have got out of the country.”

“They either did, or hid themselves very well. Or, if they fled to London, they might have been killed together in an air-raid. Beharrell tried to trace them. I did myself. He asked my help.”

“Did you get a full account of what occurred?”

“You mean *when* they ran away?”

“Yes.”

“It happened one night after dark. Beharrell was out on a case. He got in about nine, and his wife just wasn’t there.”

"No letter, or anything?"

"A letter to her husband asking him to forgive her. Little else."

"Did you see it, sir?"

"No. Beharrell apparently sat up all night nursing his wounds. Then he rang me up. Just said his wife had run away with Cranage. She mentioned his name in the letter and said she loved him. Beharrell in a rage burned the letter. I asked for it, and he told me what he'd done with it."

"How did they leave town?"

"It must have been by train. There were no cars missing and although we enquired from the taxi and other car-hirers, we got nowhere. The station staff, too, didn't see them, but that was easy in the blackout, and Cranage was able to help himself to railway passes in the R.A.F. office. He was in charge of transport of that kind."

"Were the police informed?"

"Yes, but they had enough to do and Beharrell didn't press it. He must have felt humiliated enough. It was dropped."

"What about the R.A.F.? Cranage was a deserter, technically."

"Yes. They worked hard, but, of course, Cranage anticipated all that, I'm sure. Beharrell finally came round to the idea of their being killed in London. After all, there were hundreds lost their lives that way and their fate was never known."

"That's true, sir."

"Your glass is empty. Let me refill it. You may as well relax, Littlejohn. You've another hour before dinner at the hotel and I can't think you've much work to do at this time of night."

"Very well, sir. Could you tell me if Beharrell had any enemies who might want to go as far as killing him?"

"I can't go so far . . ."

"Not even Hope of the *Red Lion*?"

"What do you know about Hope?"

There was a rasp in Pochin's voice this time.

"Beharrell and Mrs. Hope were talked about, sir."

"Someone has talked fast, then. It is quite true. They were friendly. Beharrell used to stay at the inn, somewhere in France, where Mrs. Hope came from. He went one year alone; the next year he took his car with Hope, who was his chauffeur, driving it. Hope married the girl. Some people say it was a put-up job between Beharrell and Mrs. Hope."

"Did Hope know that?"

"Hope is not very bright, but he might have found out. They might have been indiscreet. But Hope's no murderer. He's a little rabbit of a fellow without any spirit. He might try to beat his wife, if roused, but murder Dr. Beharrell . . . The thing's fantastic!"

"You think so? I've had the unhappy duty, in my time, sir, of bringing quite a lot of little rabbits to justice. It's surprising what a rabbit can do when it's roused . . . The human variety, I mean."

"You suspect Hope?"

"I suspect nobody, sir. But I mustn't miss the culprit just because he's a rabbit."

"Don't be sarcastic about it, Superintendent. I only tried to give you an idea of what he's like."

"And I'm grateful for it, sir. What kind of a man's Gralam, the antique dealer?"

"You've met him?"

"I was in his shop just before I came here."

"Gralam's late wife was a relative of Grace Brodribb and she introduced her here. Gralam tried to father Grace in rather an unpleasant way, I thought. He was terribly put out when she married Beharrell. He tried to get it broken off. Said Beharrell was too old. Even brought Grace's brother here to try to persuade him to intervene. Giles cut little ice with Grace and Beharrell."

"Was Giles Miss Brodribb's brother?"

"Yes."

"Is he still alive?"

"Yes. He's in Peterborough. He's a retired barrister, living in the old Brodribb home near the cathedral close. He's a widower, too, who lives alone."

"May I have his address?"

"Yes. I have it somewhere. He'll probably be here for Beharrell's funeral tomorrow. I'll introduce you if you're there."

"Thank you, sir."

Pochin rose, opened a Sherton bureau, and took out a book, which he consulted.

"Brodribb lives at Four, Bishop's Walk, Peterborough."

Littlejohn scribbled it on an old envelope.

"Now, sir, may I ask you another confidential question? You are lawyer to the Beharrell estate. Who benefits from it?"

Pochin rubbed his chin, threw out the cigarette end from his holder, inserted another, lit it, and drank from his glass.

"I was expecting that. I oughtn't to tell until the will's read after the funeral. But, if you promise to keep it to yourself, I'll give you some idea of how things stand. Agreed?"

"Agreed, sir."

"Beharrell was a fairly wealthy man. There was money in the family which all came to him, and he had a very good practice here with little on which to spend his money. He left a few legacies to his staff. Mrs. Trott, £1,000 and £1,000 to Hope, his former chauffeur. In addition, he had once lent Hope money to buy and re-furnish the *Red Lion*. It was a dilapidated place when the Hopes took it. That debt is cancelled by the will. It amounted to £8,000. So Hope has done well out of it."

"Perhaps conscience money."

"You said that, Superintendent, not I. Beharrell also left £5,000 to Madame Alcardi, a singer he was mixed up with . . . a flame of his. Beharrell's mother died a few days before he did. She was a widow and he was her only child. He had left the residue to her. I don't think she was ever very fond of him. She moved out to Peterborough not long after her son set up in practice here. I believe she had a chance of marrying again after her husband's death, but her son was so nasty about it and treated her would-be husband so badly, that the affair faded out. The man died and she remained a widow, half hating her son for spoiling the end of her life."

"So, who gets the residue now, sir?"

"It's divided between his wife's brother, who sided with Beharrell when Graee ran away, and remained his friend—that is the Brodribb I mentioned—and myself. We ought to inherit perhaps £20,000 apiece. I don't want it. Said as much to Beharrell. But he'd nobody else to leave it to. I told him that if he insisted, I would use it all for charity. I've enough and more of my own to see me through. I have it in mind to buy and endow an old folks' home for the needy in Caldicott."

"A very good idea. What about Mr. Brodribb? Is he well-off, too?"

"Comfortable, comfortable, I'd think. He had a good practice in law, I know. He always was a busy man when he was in harness."

The telephone rang at Pochin's elbow. He raised his eyebrows and picked up the instrument.

"It's always switched through when the office is closed and I'm here . . . I'm staying over night. Got a meeting at eight. Hullo . . . Hullo . . . Yes . . . Yes, he's here."

He handed the instrument to Littlejohn.

"For you, Littlejohn. Sergeant Cromwell."

Littlejohn listened to his colleague's story.

"Good. I'll see you later. Don't wait for me if I'm not back when dinner's ready . . ."

More conversation which Poehin couldn't hear.

"Of course. Go and enjoy yourself. By the way, where are you speaking from?"

"I thought so! Well, thanks again, old chap, and enjoy your football match."

He hung up.

"Thank you, sir. Cromwell wants permission to go and see the local eup-tie."

"I'd forgotten all about it. Some of the staff left early on account of it."

He eyed Littlejohn curiously, wondering what the message was really about.

"By the way, sir, do you remember the trouble about the well in Beharrell's garden?"

Pochin's placid manner seemed for a moment to waver. His eyes opened wider and he stared in surprise.

"Why? Whatever has that to do with the murder of Beharrell?"

"Do you remember it? There was a quarrel with the water board about it. Beharrell had filled it in, saying it was dangerous. The water board . . ."

"Yes, yes, yes, I know all about it. I was involved in it. Beharrell consulted me as his lawyer. He wanted to contest it. The board was for forcing him to re-open it and supply water at a time of great drought . . . He refused and wanted me to fight them for him. A bit awkward, because my partner and brother-in-law, Shillinglaw, was the water authority's lawyer . . . I advised Beharrell to give way. We even consulted his brother-in-law, as counsel. Brodribb supported me. So Beharrell caved in. He let them re-open the well and before they'd finished, the drought broke, so they didn't need it."

Littlejohn paused to re-charge his pipe with his own tobacco and light it.

"That's not exactly the true account, is it, sir?"

Pochin sat up straight and indignant.

"I ought to know, Superintendent."

"They didn't want to draw water from the well, but to take a boring to locate an old stream."

"Who told you that?"

"My colleague over the telephone just now. He's been talking to the foreman who was in charge. In fact, they've become buddies and are going to the football match."

But Pochin didn't see anything funny in it.

"I can't see that my account is faulty. All I know is that the board wanted to re-open the well. I wasn't concerned about *pipes*. My business was with *rights*."

Pochin was getting hot under the collar. Somehow, Littlejohn seemed to have laid a finger on a sore spot.

"In any case, I can't see what the well has to do with Beharrell's death. It seems a stupid line of enquiry to me."

"I'm sorry if I've upset you by pressing a point, sir. I apologise. But Mr. Brodribb was in the affair of the well, too?"

"I've said so, haven't I? All this seems so senseless and useless to me."

Pochin was growing petulant and bad tempered. The infantile manner mentioned by Gralam.

"As I've said before, sir, I'm concerned in this enquiry with as many details of the late doctor's life as I can find out. The filling-up of the well just after Mrs. Beharrell's flight, the anger of Beharrell when it was proposed to re-open it, the threatened law case . . ."

Pochin's jaw dropped. His face turned pale under the tan.

"Say that again, Littlejohn. *The filling-up of the well just after Mrs. Beharrell's flight?* What do you mean?"

"I mean that Beharrell must have had very strong reasons for wishing the well to remain undisturbed."

"Ridiculous! Why, as soon as Brodribb and I advised him not to fight it, he gave in and the well was dug up again."

"True. But, Beharrell had done much as a doctor for the foreman. The man thought the world of him. When they started to excavate the well again, Beharrell told the foreman he might find a skeleton at the bottom. A relic of his medical-student days which he'd found hard to dispose of and which he'd pitched down the well as a safe place."

Pochin sprang to his feet and stood over Littlejohn.

"What!?"

"The foreman found the bones, an entire skeleton. The bones of a big man. Did you say Cranage was a big man, sir?"

"You're not suggesting . . .?"

"I'm not sure of anything. But might it not have been that Beharrell caught his wife and Cranage in a compromising situation, killed one or both of them, and put Cranage's body in the well? Then, he made up the tale that they'd run away together. No wonder they were never found."

Pochin stood like one transfixed.

"It's all nonsense. I won't believe it. What about Grace? What about *her*? Why weren't *her* bones in the well, too? It's ridiculous."

"Perhaps Beharrell still loved her and couldn't face putting her in the well with her lover . . ."

"No! No!"

"No! What do you mean, sir? Do you mean we're thinking the same thoughts? That Beharrell locked up his wife's body in the old strong-room, and after that he daren't leave the house for long lest someone broke in and found out what had happened?"

"No! Not that! For God's sake, Littlejohn. No!"

Pochin was flailing the air with his arms as though fending off an evil ghost. He rushed to the wine cupboard again and this time took out brandy, half-filled a glass, and drank it off in one.

But the brandy didn't seem to do him any good. He sat down in his chair, covered his face with his hands, and broke into harsh sobbing.

Outside, in the square, dusk was casting an eerie finger over everything, shadows grew, and lights went on one by one. The two men sat together in the sumptuous room, and outside the blackbird in the trees made harsh challenging noises before it retired to rest.

## 8

## THE HOUR OF NOON

DR. BEHARRELL's will was brief and to the point about his funeral. He wished to be cremated at a nearby crematorium and his ashes scattered. No mourning, no flowers, no rites of the church. At eleven o'clock, a hearse drew up at the door of Bank House, escorted by a taxi which was to contain all the mourning party, or, to put it in the characteristic words of Dr. Beharrell, "the few friends who might care to see me off for the last time."

But Beharrell wasn't going to get away without any fuss at all. The proof of his popularity as a doctor and the esteem in which he was held locally were soon manifest. The funeral was due to leave at eleven; by a quarter to, the pavements of Upper Square were lined four-deep with people. A silent sorrowing crowd, rich and poor, workmen, women—some of them with children,—shopkeepers . . . A host of people who owed their own or the lives of those dear to them, to the murdered physician. Everyone spoke in whispers, waiting for the simple affair already ordered by the dead man. Then, to the embarrassment of the executors, flowers began to arrive. Wreaths, sprays, bunches of home-grown and wild blooms . . . Dozens of them. They were laid on the pavement in front of Bank House and there they remained until a van arrived and took some to the hospitals and others, the wreaths, which could hardly be sent to the sick, to the cemetery, where they were placed on neglected and forgotten graves and cheered them up for a brief spell.

At eleven, the coffin was carried to the hearse by the undertaker's men. Hats were removed and all the old men sitting round the war memorial stood to attention and bared their heads. Then followed a complete silence as they all waited for the mourners to enter their carriage. And

suddenly, in the midst of the hush, the blackbird in the tree in front of the police station burst into song, and a thrush, digging for worms on the vicarage lawn, not to be outdone, joined in. The birdsong continued until the small procession had left the square. The executors' taxi had been joined by an ancient barouche containing four old ladies, the doctor's oldest patients, who refused to respect his final wishes and saw him safely to his funeral pyre.

Littlejohn and Cromwell watched it all from the door of the *Red Lion*. Gralam was at his own door, too, as were the rest of the occupants of the square. All except Hope, the hotelier, and his wife. They had both disappeared and returned only after the funeral party had gone. Hope reappeared smelling strongly of drink and his wife had eyes red with weeping. Neither spoke to the other and they set about their daily chores as far away from each other as possible.

All the time, the vicar stood watching the events from the door of St. Hilary's, like a craftsman ruefully regarding the work of amateurs. When all was clear and the square had settled down again to normal routine, the men who had been repairing the clock face and who had watched the funeral from their high eyrie on the scaffolding round the tower, descended, gathered their belongings, and made their way to the lower town. Plumtree, who had been superintending the law and order of the square since early morning, spoke to them as they passed.

"Finished?"

"Aye. The old clock's goin' proper again. We've set it and it'll strike at noon, wireless time. All that's left is to take the scaffold down. The spidermen'll do that. It costs as much and more than the job itself to erect scaffoldin' these days."

"We'll miss you. It won't seem the same in the square without you lookin' down on us all. So long."

"So long, sergeant. All the best."

Littlejohn overheard it all and turned to Cromwell.

"Before they remove the scaffolding, it might be a good idea to take a look at the square from up above. We'll climb the tower."

The vicar, lost in thought as usual, shambled past, on his way to the lower town. From the open windows of the parish school came the chant of shrill young voices :

Eight twelves are ninety-six,

Nine twelves are one hundred and eight . . .

The two detectives entered the church by the main door. A small porch, a padded swing-door, and they were inside the huge building, erected regardless of cost by wealthy wool merchants of Caldicott in days gone by. Soaring pillars held the nave. A splendid clerestory, broad transoms, and the whole of the windows glazed in stained glass in memory of dead and gone local figures. White marble mural tablets set forth at considerable length and with a wealth of detail, the virtues of numerous departed citizens of Caldicott, brasses shone in remembrance of others of them, and, far away, the altar glowed under the amethyst light of the noble east window.

As Littlejohn entered, he paused at a large notice board, on which were pinned announcements of all kinds, appeals, instructions, and the order of service for the current week. The latter was apparently made out by the vicar in his own hand and bore his signature at the foot. The Superintendent studied it for so long that Cromwell wondered what his chief was finding so interesting about it. He himself occupied his mind reading the board which enumerated a string of charities, dating from 1485, when a certain Algernon Waldron, 'of this p'ish' left £10 for loaves for the poor, down to 1863, when a Mrs. Ann Gradwell had bequeathed £50 per annum for the widowed and needy gentlewomen of Caldicott.

"Let's find the way to the tower, old chap."

The stairs rose from one corner at the back of the church. A circular stone staircase, so narrow and dark that the two men had to ascend it one behind the other. Slit windows lighted it here and there and they paused now and then to relieve the monotony of the corkscrew progress and take a view of the scene below by looking through them alternately over the town and over the back of the building.

Eventually, they reached the door of the ringing-chamber, a musty square room with the ropes and sallies of

the bells hanging from holes in the ceiling. Eight ropes all told, with wooden tablets on the walls commemorating feats of ringing by initiates from far and near. In a long case on the front wall swung the pendulum and hung the weights of the clock upstairs. A door at the far end gave access to a further flight of wooden steps which led to the clock-chamber and then upwards again to the bells themselves. Littlejohn and Cromwell made their way up to the clock.

The clock had a single dial overlooking the town below and the wall facing it was broken by a window which normally gave a dim light to the room and a view over the wide country behind the church. The mechanism was not visible, but was held in a case behind the dial from which the weights and pendulum were suspended. As the two men set foot there, the steady tick gave place to a whirring of wheels and the bells above first chimed the quarters and then the tenor struck noon.

The window of the clock chamber had been removed to give access to the scaffolding surrounding the tower for repairs to the clock face. The aperture had been left open by the workmen who had just gone and Littlejohn, scrambling through, hauled himself on a structure of steel tubing which held a cat-walk of two planks leading all round the tower. A tubular handrail had also been erected for safety.

They found themselves on this temporary balcony, their hats in their hands because a stiff little breeze was blowing at this height. They had the dial of the clock at their backs and the whole view of the town before them. Cromwell, who hadn't a very good head for heights, felt a slight nausea as he looked straight down at Upper Square, although they had not climbed very far. The roofs of the tall, three-storeyed old buildings seemed almost at eye level.

They got a complete living relief-map of the town which, hitherto, they had found no time to explore. Upper Square at their feet, Sheep Street leaving it on the town side, and extending as a highway which narrowed off into the extreme distance and then disappeared in the morning haze far away. Near at hand, it was lined by shops and houses; farther off, it was a country highway again. In the midst of the line of shops entered the Norwich road, to vanish like

a thin line in the mist. The railway crossed this road and then seemed to break briefly as the station rose and hid the line. A train was just leaving Caldicott, huffing and puffing as it struggled to gather speed, and, in the opposite direction a leisurely goods train crawled to a standstill at a loop and stood waiting, in a mass of steam, for another unseen passenger train to take precedence.

To the right of Sheep Street, a number of by-roads all converged on the new suburbs, which stretched like a girdle round the old part of the town. Red houses, all geometrically arranged among a number of parallel intersecting streets, with small green patches for gardens, like a draught-board with all its little pieces ready for play.

Nearer the church, the houses grew grey and high, the streets narrowed, sometimes to the extent of not being seen at all owing to the mass of tall property which hid them. They were only distinguishable by the lines of the roofs.

Upper Square itself was surprising from the height. Its features had completely altered. The memorial park and the foreshortened soldier set almost mathematically in its very centre formed a landmark from which the rest could be charted and recognised. Gardens and outbuildings were visible behind the tall old dwellings. Gralam, for example, had a lawn with a statue in the middle behind his own property and the *Red Lion*, a specious cobblestoned courtyard with stables and coach-houses surrounding it.

The two men walked round the four sides of this rectangle of steel tubes. Looking across the great church roof they saw, as far as the eye could reach, the broad extent of fen country which Caldicott had, in its heyday, dominated. Flat stretches, divided into fields, small villages, church spires, country roads twisting and twining, woods, and nameless rivers.

They returned to the platform overlooked by the clock face. The seats in the memorial garden were empty, for their usual tenants had gone home for lunch; a policeman materialised from Sheep Street, crossed the square, and entered the police station. A light was switched on in the front bedroom of Bank House.

The houses on the Guildhall side of the square were too

near for anyone standing on the scaffolding to see what went on in their interiors, but those on the opposite side, Beharrell's, Gralam's, Pochin's, the barber's, were more distant and at a different angle. Parts of their first floor rooms, and more still of the second floor ones, were visible. On the other hand, had the rooms of the houses directly opposite been illuminated, practically all that went on there would have been seen. Madame Alcardi, for example, teaching *bel canto*, was standing at her window, nodding her head in time with some pupil or other performing in the gloomy interior at her back.

About half of the former bedroom of Beharrell in Bank House was visible from where the two detectives were standing. They could see the foot of the bed, a dressing-table, a chair, and a servant manipulating a vacuum cleaner on the carpet. She had switched on the light the better to see the results of her labours at floor level. Littlejohn watched her fascinated. As she moved with her cleaning contrivance, she vanished into the invisible depths of the room, and then re-appeared still pushing the contraption around. Now and then, unaware that she was being watched, she paused at her work to attend to other matters. Drawing up her skirt almost to the thigh, she repaired the suspender which must have given way as she bent to adjust the cleaner. Then she paused to admire herself in the mirror of the dressing-table. Having done this to her satisfaction, she opened the top drawer of the piece of furniture, rummaged about among the contents, examined objects which came to light, found something eatable and put it in her mouth, then back at the mirror again she began to alter her hair-style, using a comb from the drawer. Finally, she decided to return to her work, finished it, took a final look at herself in the looking-glass, switched off the light, and disappeared in the encircling gloom.

The Scotland Yard men looked at one another. Cromwell nodded sagely to let Littlejohn know they were both thinking the same thing.

*A murder was committed at Abbot's Caldicott last Friday.*

A murder in the very room they had now been over-

looking unseen by the occupant. A crime as plainly visible from the temporary look-out on the clock tower as the innocent caperings of the young servant at Bank House.

In Sheep Street, they could make out the black form, like a cockroach, of Canon Horninglow, just entering the square on his way home.

"Shall we go down and meet him?" said Littlejohn.

The clock struck half past twelve.

The vicar was just entering the church as they emerged from the tower staircase. He peered dimly at them and started when he recognised them.

"Good morning, sir. We've just been looking at the view of the town from the scaffolding on the clock tower."

"You are the two officers from Scotland Yard?"

A harsh, throaty voice, cultured, but growing old and roughened by efforts to make it sound in the vast building in which the ageing vicar preached.

He himself was tall and heavy, a tired man, walking with a shuffle, and lost in his own thoughts. His ruddy face had a purple tint and his eyes were filmy grey. In his time, he had been a clever man and had shown great promise; now his whole expression was of weary disappointment. His only son had been killed in the war, his wife had not survived the news by many months, and he now lived with his daughter to care for him, a spinster of forty odd, whom a broken engagement had embittered, who vented her moods and spleen on the old man, and at times drove him to despair.

Canon Horninglow was obviously upset to find Littlejohn and Cromwell in his church, especially when he heard what they had been doing. A nervous man, he developed a tic when overwrought and now one side of his face started to twitch distressingly.

"My name's Littlejohn, sir, and this is my colleague, Sergeant Cromwell."

The vicar extended a limp heavy hand and took in turn that of each of his visitors, pressed it feebly, and dropped it.

"Could I have a word with you, sir?"

Cromwell, whom the Superintendent had forewarned

that he might want to speak with the vicar alone, took the hint, made an excuse, and left them together.

"Will it not do another time, Superintendent? My lunch will be ready and my daughter waiting for me."

"I just wanted a minute with you, sir. I won't keep you."

The canon was more distressed than ever. His heavy face grew petulant and he looked ready to insist, at first. Then, he sighed and made a gesture of resignation. They walked together down the nave, the tall building echoing to their footsteps.

"We had better go in the vestry."

Littlejohn looked at the old man as he walked distractedly beside him, as though in a hurry to get it all over. In his prime, Dr. Horninglow must have been handsome, the kind who would have filled high office with dignity and skill. The high broad forehead, the large well-set ears, the firm chin, told of a man of intelligence and sound judgment. Somehow, he seemed to have gone all to pieces and missed the mark. Failure was written large on him.

"This is the place. Come in and sit down there."

The old man pointed to a carved oak chair with a thin red cushion making a semblance of comfort, and threw himself wearily in an armchair which matched it. The room was plainly furnished. A heavy oak table covered by a red baize cloth, a threadbare carpet on the floor, photographs of clerical groups in shabby frames hanging from nails on the walls, some of them askew. Vestments on hooks. A large oak cupboard, presumably for communion plate, and a very old safe in one corner.

Littlejohn sensed that the canon knew what the interview was going to be about. There was fear in the old man's eyes, his cheek flicked with his distressing affliction, his large purple hands trembled. He had the look of one praying inwardly for relief. Lunch was at one o'clock, but the vicar had tried to avoid the interview by telling himself, to ease his conscience, that he wanted his lunch right away. Now, he felt a growing sense of relief that his ordeal would soon be over.

"I would value your help on one or two problems connected with Dr. Beharrell's death, sir."

Littlejohn's voice seemed to come from very far away. At least, the canon thought, it is a compassionate voice, the voice of a man of the world who understands human problems. Perhaps he will not press the question, or, if he does, he will excuse what must surely appear to be natural weakness, an understandable diffidence.

"Yes . . .?"

The answer came in a whisper.

"Do you go much to the clock tower, sir? Have you taken advantage of the temporary structure there to climb and take a new view of the square and the town? Or, maybe, you were interested in the actual work of restoring the clock face?"

"That is so. In fact, Superintendent, I am interested in clocks myself. It is a hobby of mine. I have a collection of bracket clocks in the vicarage. Two Tompions. Would you care to come and see them . . .?"

He paused expectantly. No. It was no use. No use trying to prevaricate any longer. His arms fell in resignation over the arms of his chair.

"You would then, get a number of unusual views from your high viewpoint. The town itself . . . and what went on in some of the houses of the square?"

The vicar put his hand over his eyes, rubbed them wearily, and then nodded.

"Why, sir, didn't you tell the police what you saw going on in the bedroom of Dr. Beharrell on Friday last?"

The old man stretched out his hand as though to stop Littlejohn.

"No, no, Superintendent. It is . . . it was not so easy as that. It involved a terrible decision. One which I was not strong enough to make. I turned coward and tried to avoid responsibility. I am in your hands."

"You see, sir, I knew that the notes sent to the police were written by a cultured man, although you tried to make them appear illiterate. For one thing, as far as I know, the *Times* was the only daily paper which mentioned my promotion to Superintendent on Friday last. That was

only quite casually, too, but outside my own intimate circle, only a reader of the *Times* could have known it so soon. That fact marks down the type of reader . . . Then, again, only the scholarly ones call this town *Abbot's Caldicott*. To the rest, it is just plain Caldicott."

" You are right. I thought I had better let Scotland Yard know. I knew nobody there. So I searched the newspaper. I take the *Times* regularly. It was there."

" You wrote on blank scraps of church magazine, I presume. The paper was magazine paper. And you tried to disguise your hand, but made the mistake of putting a Greek 'c,' which you altered, but not well enough. I notice from your church service orders on the board there, that you write your 'e' in that way."

" I underestimated you, Superintendent. I didn't mean to cause you all this trouble. But I knew the local police would never solve this crime. I felt that with Scotland Yard involved, there might be a chance."

Littlejohn leaned across the table and looked the old man in the eyes.

" But *why*, sir? Why all this trouble? Why this anonymity and secrecy? Why not go to the police, tell them what you'd seen, and leave the rest to them?"

The vicar rubbed his eyes again and gently touched his offending cheek as though trying to control the nervous shaking there.

" It seemed at the time to be grossly disloyal for me to do so. I was distressed and confused and I had nobody, nobody to go to for advice. The conflict I saw going on was between Dr. Beharrell and a parishioner of mine. I would much rather have approached him and told him to go to the police himself and confess. But knowing him, I was sure he wouldn't take my advice. Nay, he might even have . . . he might have harmed me."

" You mean, he might have done you violence, sir?"

" Not exactly. He is a man who has been in my confidence. I have told him many things . . . many private and personal things which I could not bear to be made public. He might . . ."

" I understand, sir. But you see that all this cannot pre-

vent my pursuing the case to its conclusion. You feared this man because, if he were arrested, let us say, through your lodging information with the police, he would do harm to your reputation, maybe to your career?"

"That is so."

"Who is the man, sir? You realise you must tell me. It is your duty to do so. Not only that, it is against the law for you to withhold information in a case like this."

Littlejohn felt heartily sorry for the old man. He looked to have trouble enough without all this. By a pure stroke of ill luck, he had been examining the repairs to the clock when he'd seen a murder being committed in a lighted room opposite.

"If you care to tell me, sir, what the man in question is holding over your head, I promise it will remain confidential, and I will do my best to see that you aren't troubled by his divulging it when we arrest him. That is, sir, if the matter isn't criminal, of course."

The canon wavered and again pressed his hand to his eyes, as though trying to hide from the truth.

"No . . . It's not criminal. Just disgraceful, that's all. It concerns my daughter. I am a widower, Superintendent, and she is all I have. My son was shot down over Germany during the war."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. My daughter during the war was in the W.R.A.F. She became engaged to a scoundrel. He seduced her, and a child was born. He was a married man. The matter was hushed up. The child was adopted by foster-parents, decent people. The matter was arranged by . . . by . . ."

"By the man you saw with Beharrell?"

"Yes. You may think I am afraid of nothing . . . afraid of shadows, Superintendent. But my daughter is highly-strung and the people of this town would make her life a misery if the matter came out . . . became public. She has not many friends in Abbot's Caldicott. She has always been regarded as a snob, whereas really she is terribly shy . . . They have mistaken her reticence for snobbery. They would mock her and make a hell on earth for her if they knew of

her misfortune. I could have taken her away, you may say. But I have no money but my stipend, Superintendent. My late wife had a long and dreadful illness following the loss of our son. We spent all we had on educating the two of them . . . And, I am too old to move. My next move will be to the home for aged clergynen."

He smiled bitterly at the thought of it.

It all seemed trivial on the face of it, but Littlejohn understood. The snobbish parson's daughter with her nose in the air, falls from her pedestal like any other human being, and the old man is saddled with the burden of it.

" You had better tell me now, sir, the name of the man you saw with Dr. Beharrell. What were they doing?"

" Fighting, Superintendent. They were struggling together and the other struck the doctor two fearful blows on the head, and I saw the doctor fall. Then he . . . the other one, left the room. I hurried downstairs, too. I had seen enough. I waited in the church porch to see him come out by the front door, but he did not. He must have crept out behind. The light remained on in the room all night. I got up twice and looked out from my bedroom window. Once at two, and again at four. It was still burning. In the morning, I called at the surgery to ask for the doctor. They said he had been out of town since the day before. I felt that his body must have been disposed of, otherwise someone surely would have found it. I was terrified, torn between my duty, my fears, and my opinion that the doctor had come to an evil end. I dare not go and tell the police face to face . . . So, I wrote anonymously. God forgive me and pity me. I am a wretched old man and unworthy of my cloth."

" Don't say that. It's not true. In a few weeks time, it will be all over. You'll see, sir. Things will be as before. Now, tell me the name of the man you saw struggling with Beharrell."

" He is the people's warden of this church."

" And he arranged matters in your daughter's misfortune? Is he a solicitor, sir?"

" Yes."

" Mr. Vincent Pochin?"

The old man hung his head and spoke in a whisper.

"Yes."

"I thought so, sir. And now you will say nothing of this whatever. I think we might solve the case satisfactorily without your being upset at all. Thank you for being so candid and helpful."

Canon Horninglow looked up and cast a faint relieved smile across at Littlejohn.

"I always thought the police were dreadful people to deal with! I will not say God bless you, Superintendent. It sounds too melodramatic, but I cannot tell you how much this interview has relieved me. I actually thought of hurling myself from the tower and ending it all in what people would think was an accident. Now, I am a new man . . ."

Littlejohn began to fill his pipe and, as he put his hand in his pocket for matches, he suddenly realised where he was and smiled awkwardly.

"I believe I was just going to light my pipe, sir. I'd forgotten where I was. Well . . . My colleague will be waiting for lunch, so I'll say goodbye for the present. Everything will be all right, Canon Horninglow."

They rose.

"I'll see you to the door, Superintendent."

They made their way back through the great empty church, but this time they were interrupted. From a gloomy side chapel stepped a woman, who had apparently been praying there. The canon halted and greeted her.

"Hello, Lydia . . . This is Superintendent Littlejohn, the detective from London who's investigating the Beharrell case."

He turned to Littlejohn.

"My daughter Lydia, Superintendent."

The vicar had described her as nervous and hysterical, but the woman now shaking hands seemed anything but that. She must have been between thirty-five and forty, taller than the average, large-boned and solidly built. She looked quite distinguished, with her clear complexion, dark

short, well-cut features, and a complete air of

And for all that, she wasn't very attractive.

Something intense and overbearing about her;

the kind who knows her own mind and will make all the arrangements. The idea of her being shy and needing her father's protection seemed ridiculous and if she'd been seduced by a scoundrel at some time in her career, she looked the type who would go half way in the transaction.

"The Superintendent and I have been having a long talk, my dear."

"Have you, father?"

She turned to Littlejohn, who noticed the dark intensity of her eyes now.

"He has been very worried about the doctor's death, Superintendent. I hope you have been able to re-assure him that he's in no danger himself. Welcome to Abbot's Caldicott. I hope you'll be successful in clearing up the case."

"Thank you. I don't think there's ever been any risk of violence to your father, Miss Horninglow. He can tell you all about it over lunch."

"Which reminds me that our own lunch is ready. Come along, father . . . Goodbye for the present, Superintendent. We shall be meeting again, I'm sure."

The vicar hesitated and then, forgetting his task of seeing Littlejohn off the premises, he absent-mindedly fell in behind his daughter and followed her to the side door which gave on the vicarage. Half way, he turned, remembering he hadn't said goodbye.

"Goodbye, Superintendent."

The life seemed to have gone out of the old man and Littlejohn noticed his strained features as he turned, and the way he'd started to shuffle his feet again as he walked.

## 9

## THE SINGING MISTRESS

ANOTHER good lunch at the *Red Lion*. Mrs. Hope was a fine cook and today she had excelled herself. As though she might have tried to forget Dr. Beharrell and his funeral over the pots and pans of the kitchen. She attended to Littlejohn and Cromwell personally.

"Is everything to your satisfaction, gentlemen?"

Littlejohn thanked her and almost added 'madame,' for the food, the atmosphere, and the bearing of the landlady were much more French than English.

Friendly relations seemed to have been restored between Hope and his wife, too. They might have had a conference, agreed that unusual behaviour before the detectives would arouse suspicion, and arranged to smile at one another when anyone else was about. They smiled too much and overdid it a bit.

"Hope and his missus seem pleased with themselves," said Cromwell, pouring out coffee and milk from little earthenware jugs.

"Too pleased, old man."

The funeral party hadn't yet returned and were presumably lunching somewhere en route from the crematorium.

"Until Pochin and Brodrribb get back, we'll spend the time with the other neighbours in the square," said Littlejohn. "It looks as if the whole solution is hiding out in this neighbourhood. We'll comb it thoroughly. You look as if you need a haircut, Cromwell. Go and consult the barber and see if you can get any gossip out of him. I'll go and see Madame Alcardi."

"Going in for *bel canto*, sir?"

"If necessary, yes. Everything seems quiet, both at the barber's and the singer's. This might be a good time."

Upper Square was silent and deserted as Littlejohn crossed it to Madame Alcardi's. The children and workmen were having their mid-day break, the habitués from the seats in the memorial garden were away at lunch, the shops were closed. Only the bronze soldier remained there like a figure from the *Sleeping Beauty*, transfixed where he stood on his warlike way to Sheep Street. Even the birds were quiet.

This was another large house, very much like those of Pochin and Beharrell, only with a different atmosphere. The ground floor was occupied by the *modiste* who made fashionable and expensive hats and showed them one by one in the window to the left of the door. The first floor was Madame Alcardi's flat, and above that a ladies' hairdresser had rooms, which, when illuminated and overlooked from neighbouring attics, showed rows of cubicles, with here and there a woman under a large hair-dryer looking like a fantastic helmet for a space-ship. Right at the top, two small, shabby rooms were frequented by a bookie and a fortune-teller.

The moment you crossed the threshold of the building, you were enveloped in an exotic warmth, the indescribable atmosphere of scented artistry and women's finery. It was difficult to sort out all the smells as they pervaded the landings and hallway and poured gently into the street through the open door. The heavy, insinuating scent of shampoo, the thick aromatic weight of brilliantine and hair oils, the lingering voluptuousness of perfumed ladies trying on hats, the gentle intermittent whiffs of gin from the brush cupboard under the stairs to which the charwoman frequently retired. When Littlejohn entered, the whole was swamped by an odour of well-made coffee.

- He climbed to the first floor and rang the bell. There was a scuffle within. A woman answered the door. She was small, plump, and vivacious, with dark sparkling eyes and jet black hair brushed back from a broad low forehead. She wore a full black skirt and a canary-coloured sleeveless blouse, cut generously low across her flowing bosom. Her arms were exceptionally white and shapely but disfigured by vaccination marks.

"Madame Alcardi?"

"Yes. You are the detective from London?"

They all called him that now. The detective from London. As though from time to time, all the occupants of the square held a kind of general meeting and compared notes and talked about interesting visitors by special cognomens.

"I thought you might be calling. You have been to most other houses in the square already."

"You seem to know all about my movements."

"Yes. I always have my pupils coming and going and I often have morning coffee with Elise, the hairdresser upstairs, and Madame Jocelin, who keeps the hat-shop below. They have many clients to bring them all the news."

Madame Alcardi was obviously part English, at least. She spoke with a faint Tyneside accent. Probably Madame Jocelin and Elise were the same, too, and Mademoiselle Le Mont, the palmist in the attic. A whole houseful of them, assuming foreign names because they thought it sounded more artistic. And the whole rarified atmosphere spoiled by the "commission agent" at the top, Bert Beezer!

"Will you come in?"

He crossed the threshold into the overpowering scent of the coffee. It was a living-room used also as a singing studio. A grand piano, a harp in one corner, a highly polished parquet floor with mats here and there, comfortable modern furniture, the walls papered in three different colours with reproductions of famous pictures hanging on them. Over an anthracite stove in blue and white Dutch tiles, a good oil portrait of Madame Alcardi herself as Carmen. Behind the room was apparently the scullery and across the landing presumably a bedroom. The whole place was cosy in an easy-going, slightly exotic style.

A small table was laid near the window and Madame Alcardi was just finishing her meal. Traces of a meat pie and the remains of bread rolls and butter. A blue check tablecloth, a silver coffee-pot, and a cup and saucer in fine china.

"You've had lunch, Superintendent?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Have some coffee, then . . ."

She went in the scullery and returned with another cup and saucer and a strawberry flan. She poured out his coffee, cut the tart, and put a piece of it on a plate for Littlejohn without even asking if he wanted it.

Beharrell had been very friendly with Madame Alcardi, they said. No wonder. The lonely doctor, with no friends, would find comfort and companionship with this pleasant homely woman who made no fuss at all. Even now, she was sitting opposite the Superintendent, munching tart and drinking, as though they'd been childhood friends. He liked her peculiar manner of speech, too. It was simple and charming, with an almost foreign idiom, captured, no doubt, from her happy days with Alcardi.

"You are Italian, Madame Alcardi?"

She laughed merrily.

"My name was Nora Brown and I was born in Sunderland. I was a soprano in the New World Opera Company and I married a tenor called Alcardi. We were very happy, but my husband failed to become a naturalised Englishman. When war broke out, he was interned, and they had no more sense than to ship him and some of his fellow countrymen to Canada. Their ship was torpedoed and my husband was drowned."

She told it all in a matter-of-fact way and quite vivaciously, as though he might one day be coming back again. Or perhaps the pain of it all had disappeared and left memories to cheer her.

"I won't keep you long. I suppose you will have pupils coming soon."

"In half an hour. There's no hurry."

Littlejohn wondered how deep her relationship with Beharrell had been. His funeral that day didn't seem to have saddened her at all. Here she was, enjoying her little mid-day meal, eating a second helping of strawberry flan without any worry about its effect on her plumpness. You got the impression that it would need a lot to disturb the peace and quiet of this home and the woman who owned it and had evidently suffered much in her time. Anyhow,

Beharrell had left her five thousand in his will. Littlejohn wondered how she'd feel when she heard the good news!

"You were a friend of Dr. Beharrell, Madame Alcardi?"

"Yes. I came here just after the war and I got a bad attack of laryngitis. I must have been singing too vigorously . . . Dr. Beharrell attended me. We became friends. He used to call here when he was lonely. Just as you are calling now . . . Only you are not lonely; just on business."

She had a charming, candid way of putting things. At the back of his mind, Littlejohn wondered why the fool Beharrell hadn't married her and settled down again. He'd probably have avoided the present catastrophe.

"He once asked me to marry him, but I told him we would never get on as man and wife. He hadn't the least interest in music, which is my life, and I've even known him fall asleep when I've played the piano to him. I am a temperamental woman, Superintendent, and although my late husband and I quarrelled sometimes like cat and dog, we loved one another enough to forgive. Dr. Beharrell wanted me to give up my pupils and move into that dark old house. I would have been a bird in a cage there, wouldn't I?"

She asked the question as she might ask it of some old respected friend.

"Yes. I think you would, Madame Alcardi."

"Please call me Mrs. Alcardi. You will then sound less like one of my students."

"Did the doctor take you into his confidence very much?"

"In what way? He never talked about his patients, if that's what you mean."

"No. I mean about his past life. His wife ran away from him with an Air Force officer, didn't she? Did he ever mention it?"

"Once only. He told me he'd been married before and his wife had left him. He was, I think, getting ready to ask me to take her place. He was a charming man in his own way, but I had already been told how he treated the first Mrs. Beharrell. She, too, was like a little bird in a cage. He was a jealous-natured man. I once mentioned another

man friend of mine and he grew quite annoyed. He didn't come for a long time after."

"When did he last call here?"

"About a month ago."

"Was he in any way different from usual?"

"No. He stayed an hour or so and we had coffee and brandy together. Then, as usual, he hurried away."

"You were neither of you in love with the other, then?"

"No. And I was not his mistress."

She said it in a half comical tone.

"I say that, Superintendent, just in case any of the gossips of the square tell you otherwise. This is a great place for gossip. Many of them have little else to do with their time."

"You say the doctor hurried away. To a patient? Or was he always in a hurry?"

She paused thoughtfully and then poured out two more cups of coffee.

"More tart, Superintendent?"

"No, thanks."

She rose, carried off the lunch things and left only the cups and saucers.

"Dr. Beharrell was always in a hurry. I think he would often have liked to stay longer here. He enjoyed it, I know. But he always wanted to get back home. I think he was afraid of something happening."

"Such as . . .?"

She looked puzzled.

"I don't know. He would get fidgety . . . As though he expected someone to call."

"Or burgle his house if he weren't there?"

She opened her eyes wide.

"Do you know, I've often thought the same thing. Purely instinct, and yet . . . Why do you say it?"

"He'd had burglars a time or two and seemed to have a kind of phobia about it."

"That's right."

"In other words, he had something in the house which was very precious to him and he didn't want it to be stolen. So, he never went on holidays, never left home for even a

day, and always showed an itch to get back whenever he was out . . .”

“That’s exactly right, Superintendent. How did you find it out in so short a time?”

“Was he ever away from home for long all the time you knew him, Mrs. Alcardi?”

“No. I used to tell him a holiday would do him good, but he always said he’d rather work, and sleep in his own bed at nights.”

Littlejohn rose and looked through the window. The old men were returning to their places in the gardens. People were walking around again, the shop below had opened, and footsteps on the stairs announced that the ladies’ hairdresser was receiving clients. Miss Horninglow was just leaving the vicarage and making for the direction of the town.

“This is a very nice place, isn’t it, Mrs. Alcardi? Quiet and clean . . . You live here all the time?”

“Yes. I have a bedroom just across the passage. I enjoy life.”

“You can just see Dr. Bcharrell’s house from here. Did you notice anything unusual about the place last Friday evening?”

Her large dark eyes opened wide again.

“You mean when the murder was committed?”

“Yes.”

“I was out most of the evening. I’m very fond of the movies, and Elise—that’s the hairdresser who has the rooms above these—Elise and I went to the pictures in the town. Elise, by the way, is Mrs. Clara Bumphrey, but people seem to like French names for hairdressers, I don’t know why. She’ll confirm what I say.”

“I take your word for it. What time did you get home?”

“Just before eleven.”

“Did you notice anything peculiar about the doctor’s house, Mrs. Alcardi?”

She thought a little while.

“There was a light on in the first floor room on the front. That was the doctor’s bedroom.”

“And you went to bed at what time?”

She looked puzzled. "Midnight or about that. Why, Superintendent? You surely don't suspect me of doing anything to Doctor Beharrell?"

"Certainly not. I'm just interested in all that went on at Bank House that night Beharrell met his death."

"I can see the same front room from my bedroom over the passage. It was still illuminated when I turned out my own light, because I pulled up my blind when I put the light out."

So, Canon Horninglow had been right!

"Did you ever visit Bank House, Mrs. Alcardi?"

"Only the front room on the ground floor, the large one the doctor used as a living-room. He asked me over to see his silver and Waterford glass. By the way, those would be a haul for a burglar. There were hundreds of pounds worth of priceless antiques of that kind."

Another pause. Outside they could hear panting and shuffling footsteps pass the door and mount the next flight. Mlle. Le Mont ascending to consult the oracle again.

"I see Miss Horninglow, from the vicarage, is making her way to town. Do you know her?"

"Not very well. She's a customer of Elise, who's told me about her. A very earnest and domineering kind of woman. That's probably why she's never married. She's good-looking enough in a way, but men don't like the bossy kind, do they? They'd rather be petted and coaxed."

She gave Littlejohn a coy smile and he thought how much Beharrell must have liked this cosy room with its lively cheerful mistress.

"I believe she once half set her cap at Dr. Beharrell."

"Indeed! Tell me about that, please."

She tried to brush it away.

"It isn't fair to laugh at her. They do say she's very decent, really, and it's her father who's prevented her from marrying. Her brother was killed in the war and her mother died of a broken heart after it. She had to come home and look after the canon, who's a fussy and troublesome old man, by all accounts. It was bound to make her bitter, because she's the kind who ought to have a husband and children to look after."

"Who told you about her liking for Beharrell?"

"Certainly not the doctor! It was just silly gossip again. As I've already said, the tenants here get a lot of local scandal from their clients, who have little else to do than tear up other folks' characters. Somebody told Madame Jocelin—Flora Jones is her real name—that Lydia Horninglow was very interested in Dr. Bcharrell. She'd been to see him professionally about something, and Mrs. Trott, his housekeeper, had told somebody, who in turn retailed it all to Madame Jocelin, that Lydia had been asking her, Mrs. Trott, all kinds of things about the doctor whilst she was waiting for a consultation. She tried to pump her about his wife who ran away and her lover who ran away with her. She asked about the doctor's habits, and even where his bedroom was and what kind of a house, and how he treated his wife when she was here. All kinds of things. Mrs. Trott shut up like an oyster, because she's a possessive type of housekeeper, who always let it be known that if another Mrs. Beharrell entered Bank House, Mrs. Trott would pack her bags and go."

"And all this was retailed about the town by the furious Mrs. Trott?"

"Hardly that. She was so wild at the time that she had to let off steam to somebody, who in turn brought the whole tale to the hat shop. It's the kind of thing idle women revel in. Tearing other women's reputations to pieces. And Miss Horninglow isn't very popular in certain quarters. She's regarded as a snob, you know. Mrs. Trott was all the more incensed, because Miss Horninglow is the vicar's daughter and Mrs. Trott herself is a spiritualist with no time for the established church."

The little carriage-clock on the mantelpiece was on half past two and there was a knock on the door. Mrs. Alcardi answered it and Littlejohn could hear her telling a pupil to wait a minute in the bedroom over the landing.

"I must be getting along, Mrs. Alcardi. I've wasted enough of your precious time. But may I ask, before I go, whether or not the hat-shop information bureau has ever heard of Miss Horninglow having a . . . shall we call him a boy friend, at any time?"

She did not laugh at the idea, but just shook her head gravely.

"I never heard of it. They'd have been sure to tell me if such a glorious piece of information came to hand. She was away part of the war, you know. In the W.R.A.F. What happened then is anyone's guess. News wouldn't reach here."

"Where was she stationed? Do you know?"

"I wasn't here at the time, but funnily enough, I do. I have a pupil, the daughter of the vicar of St. Andrew's, a smaller church than St. Hilary's, at Cold Staunton, nearly four miles from here. She was a child at the time, but remembers Miss Horninglow calling at the vicarage in uniform. Her father was vicar of a church two miles from Mareham-le-Fen at that time. Miss Horninglow was stationed at Mareham. My pupil's father, Mr. Lightfoot, was a former curate of Canon Horninglow."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Alcardi. You have been most kindly and helpful. I'm grateful for your hospitality, too."

"It's been a pleasure, Superintendent."

She still hesitated, tapping her full red lips with her forefinger, as though making up her mind about something.

"I think I ought to tell you something, although it's more hat-shop gossip. One ought not to speak ill of the dead . . . But Dr. Beharrell did have a mistress. One wouldn't really blame him, a lonely, almost stricken man, but he shouldn't have chosen a married woman for it. Rumour had it that Mrs. Hope, of the *Red Lion*, was too friendly with him. In fact, she's been seen leaving Bank House secretly after dark . . . Now that's a really scandalous tale, Superintendent. But you've a right to know."

"Thank you. I'll keep it to myself, but it may be useful later. What of her husband?"

"He used to be the doctor's chauffeur and thought a lot of his old master. I heard he met Mrs. Hope in France when he and the doctor were staying somewhere on the Riviera. Madame Jocelin said one of her customers described George Hope as a *cocu complaisant*, an affable

fool, but I believe he has beaten his wife a time or two. She has her hair done at Elise's and Elise has seen the bruises on her arms."

"And was this going on until the doctor's death?"

"As far as I know, yes. It's only a few weeks since Elise mentioned the bruises to me and Mrs. Hope was trying to hide them and said she'd fallen in one of the bedrooms."

They shook hands.

"Thank you again, Mrs. Alcardi. You've been a great help . . ."

She saw him to the door and he made his way downstairs. A blast of aromatic shampoo accompanied him to the main door. Through the glass panel of the hat-shop he could see Madame Jocelin busy trying on model hats for expensive clients. A Rolls-Royce was drawn-up at the door with a patient husband sitting inside it. In the shop the information bureau was hard at it.

## 10

## THE BARBER

MR. ERIC GIBBET carried on his *coiffures modernes* in a large house, very like the rest in the square from the outside, but very different inside. This house had a tired, faded look; its occupants packed up and went home every evening and left it deserted. The walls of the hall and staircase were decorated in dirty brown paint, the stairs were covered in old linoleum with metal treads to protect the wood, and an indescribable smell pervaded the place. It was a mixture of steam and singeing cloth from the tailor's on the top floor, and the scent of cheap setting lotions and hair pomades used by Mr. and Mrs. Gibbet, who jointly ran the male and female sections of their business.

Mr. Jack Hyman on the top floor was the best tailor in Caldicott. He advertised a Savile Row apprenticeship, the best people took his word, and endured the two flights of stairs to his workshop for the benefit of his fittings. It was his boast that he "dressed" the Pochins, the Shillinglaws, the vicar, and the county court judge, and that even the Chief Constable came from Dofford to be tailored. And now, some of the monicd working classes from the lower town were becoming his customers, too, and he was prepared to make a natty suit as well as "build" a model.

On the middle floor, Mr. Munro, the osteopath, saw patients by appointment and during his consulting hours, the better classes could be met on the stairs, along with Mr. Hyman's customers, carrying their rheumatics, arthritis, slipped discs, loose cartilages and displaced bones to Mr. Munro for manipulation. Now and then, as Mr. Munro warmed to his work, loud bumps and cries could be heard below in Mr. Gibbet's barber's shop, whereat Mr. Gibbet would pause and wave his fist at the ceiling.

"That butcher's at it agen . . ." And the grateful victims

would now and then reel downstairs like automatons, or else be assisted down to their conveyances by Mr. Munro's lady attendant, an unctuous blonde on whom Mr. Gibbet had secret designs, which he tried to hide by questioning her relations with Mr. Munro.

When Cromwell entered the barber's shop it was empty save for the owner, who was studying a tourist handbook.

"Roll on, Saturday," said Mr. Gibbet, by way of greeting, "I'm off to Yewgoslavia for me holidays . . . Ever been to Yewgoslavia?"

Then, recognising Cromwell from his picture in the local paper, he laid down his booklet and greeted him.

"Good mornin'. It's an honour to meet you, Mr. Cromwell. I hope the case is comin' along fine."

Cromwell passed the time of day, ignorcd the enquiry, and said he'd like a haircut. Mr. Gibbet motioned him to a chair, spread a cloth about him, and carefully studied the structure and lie of his victim's head. "Ha!" he said, and took up the clippers.

In the room across the hall, Mrs. Gibbet attended to the ladies, but such was the nature of her husband, that he had to cross to inspect her handiwork and approve it from time to time. Then he said, "Jest excuse me," to his own customer, and left to greet the lady under treatment. If she pleased his eye, he caressed her locks and smiled on her, much to the anger of his wife, a large, jealous woman, who, knowing her husband's weakness for the opposite sex, hardly ever allowed him out of her sight and had decided, much to his disgust, to go with him to Yewgoslavia. "You'll not enjoy yourself at all. It's a long way and the travel's tiring; the food's strange and won't suit you; I don't know what the 'otels are like; and of course, it's Communist, you know . . ." "What are you goin' for, then?" she had asked, and started to pack her own bag as well as Mr. Gibbet's.

Mr. Gibbet was a tall, thin man with protruding grey eyes, which were always on the move, a bald head, which was a poor testimony to the hair restorers he made and retailed, and long cold hands. Cromwell shivered as Mr. Gibbet laid them upon him.

"Find it cold in 'ere, Mr. Cromwell? I'll light the gas-fire."

"No, no. Don't bother. I'm all right."

But the barber insisted on leaving him whilst he wrestled with the fire, which back-lit every time he applied a match and which he had to give up as a bad job eventually. "It's the force of gas that's wrong, Mr. Cromwell. That Jack Hyman uses it all with his big flat-irons. I've complained, but you know how things are these days."

Cromwell began to regret that he'd ever called at all. He disliked Mr. Gibbet and the gaudily decorated saloon with its heavy atmosphere of hair oils, shampoos and pomades, and its air of shoddy finery imposed on the damp and dry rot of the old house. There was another pause as Mr. Gibbet whispered some instructions to his assistant who had just entered and resembled a Teddy-boy. Something about going to the local infirmary to cut a special customer's hair. "O.K.," said the new arrival, whose hair style, parted back and front, resembled two feathers lying behind his large ears. "O.K.," and he went out for the rest of the session.

"You're a tenant of this place, Mr. Gibbet?"

"Yes, and the rent's far too 'igh."

The barber then opened-up about the rates, the condition of the premises, the things he had to put up with. They were even too snobby in the square to allow him to put out a long barber's pole, and he'd had to compromise by a small red-white-and-blue toffee-stick of a thing which revolved in a glass cylinder by the side of the door. It wasn't good enough . . . "Not too much off the top?" interpolated Mr. Gibbet. "Not too much off anywhere. Just a trim, that's all . . ." Cromwell seemed not to hear a discourse on a small quantity of dandruff Mr. Gibbet pretended to find, and the remedy for it contained in a bottle which was indicated.

"Did you find Dr. Beharrell a good neighbour?"

"Never a bit of trouble. A good customer, too. Kept to his job, did the doctor. He'd come in 'ere and talk as man to man with me. 'What's good for slight baldness, Eric?' he'd say. And I'd tell 'im. No argument. I liked the doctor.

The only objection I had, was that his place seemed to attract the burglars. Always somebody tryin' to break-in . . ."

He paused.

"Do you know, Mr. Cromwell, on one occasion, a burglar actually tried to get in the doctor's by knockin' down the wall in my cellar. Sort o' tunnellin' in, see?"

"No! Was he successful?"

"Of course not. The walls are feet thick in these old houses. It 'ud take you days and days. Luckily, Munro, the chap on the floor above, came back that night and heard the noise in the cellar. He's a timid chap, is Munro, although to 'ear the way he chucks his customers round sometimes, you wouldn't think so. So he went over to fetch the police. Of course, when they got 'ere, the man had took alarm and gone."

"How did he get in this place, though? Nobody lives here at night, do they?"

"No. He must 'ave had a key or picked the lock. None of the windows was forced. Anyhow, the thickness of the walls must 'ave discouraged him. He's not been since. Instead, he tried gettin' in by the doctor's basement, but they disturbed 'im again. He was a persistent bloke, if it was the same chap each time."

"Let me see . . . Mr. Pochin lives on the other side?"

"Yes, the landlord. A bit of a dark 'orse is Mr. Vincent Pochin. His brother's all right and so is Mr. Shillinglaw. But Vincent . . . I could tell you a thing or two. He's got a flat there and stays at nights sometimes."

"You mean . . ."

"Of course. Women . . . You don't mean to tell me that when a man lives only a few miles from town and 'as a fine Bentley to take 'im home, he's goin' to start a flat here, if he isn't up to somethin' . . . Well?"

Here Mr. Gibbet had to pause to give particular attention with the scissors to a portion of Cromwell's head. The sergeant shuddered again as the cold fingers clung to his neck and the sides of his face. Mr. Gibbet began to strop a razor.

"I don't need a shave. I've done it myself."

Mr. Gibbet turned patronisingly.

"And if I may say so, Mr. Cromwell, you look it. You've tore your left eheek and under the chin 'orribly. I'd recommend a bottle of this after-shave lotion."

Cromwell ignored the criticism and sales-talk and Mr. Gibbet thereupon began to ehop about on the sealp with his razor, removing rolls of hair to the anxiety of the patient.

"We were sayin' . . . women . . ."

"Anybody in particular, Mr. Gibbet?"

"Nobody that I'd know, Mr. Cromwell, nor would you. Nor, would we want to know. Street-women, Mr. Cromwell. That's Mr. Vincent Pochin. He's too sly to get involved with the good-lookin' women of 'is own set. There might be a scandal, you see . . ."

"You've seen all this going-on?"

"Of course. I 'ave to come back at nights often. There's work to be done. I've no time in the day to make my 'air creams, lotions and the like. I 'ave to work overtime, you see. My workroom's on the back; the little room behind this. It overlooks the wing of Mr. Vineent Pochin's house and looks right on his bedroom. I've seen 'em before they drew the blinds . . ."

Mr. Gibbet was a peeping-Tom and well-known for it in the town. He had, on one occasion, had his eyes blacked by a decent young fellow courting his girl on Caldicott Common.

"But there were other funny goings-on I've seen from my workshop, Mr. Cromwell. I've been 'ere a long time and seen some queer 'appenings. But the limit was the affair of Dr. Beharrell's well. Talk about spyin'—it beat the Gestapo. The water board made him open it up again after he'd 'ad it filled in. It's some years since. You'd be surprised how keen Mr. Vineent Poehin was on what was going on when they dug up the well again. He never left that back window! When I was 'avin' my midday meal in the room behind, I'd keep seein' his face appearin' round the curtains watchin' the men diggin'. And, at night, I'd see the lights on in the flat. Pochin watched the whole operation from start to finish, as though there was a treasure buried

in that well and he was goin' to 'ave it if they brought it to the light o' day. It puzzled me how he managed to eat and sleep while it was goin' on. A proper feat of endurance."

"Funny."

"Yore tellin' me . . . Excuse me."

Mr. Gibbet ran into the room across the passage which a young blonde lady had entered ten minutes ago. There was a pause and then the barber returned, rubbing his hands and baring his false teeth in a delighted leer.

"'Ave to kccp an eye on the ladies' section. Got to see the cwoffyures are bang up-to-date, else they go elsewhere. There's another place in the square, run by a bit of a chit as calls 'erself Elise. Elise, indeed! Born in the lower quarters of Caldicott . . . I'll show 'em. Bang up-to-date, 'ere. Latest stylcs . . ."

He rubbed his long obscene hands again.

"Anythin' on the hair, sir?"

"No, thanks."

Mr. Gibbet, with no more customers as yet, for they mostly came before and after business or else mid-morning, began to clip and snip round Cromwell's head to waste time and continue the gossip.

"Not that Mr. Vincent Pochin isn't a regular customer of mine. All the upper class are."

He indicated a battery of little cubby-holes, like large sections of honeycomb, in which reposed the private shaving pots, brushes, and razors of his select clients, each with his name attached. Mr. V. Pochin; Mr. Shillinglaw; Mr. S. Pochin; Mr. Waddylove; Mr. Gralam . . . a score or more of them. Some of the owners, including Dr. Beharrell, were dead, and their paraphernalia remained there like memorial tablets in a graveyard.

"Did Dr. Beharrell know that Pochin was watching the well?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. The well. I shouldn't think so. Why should he? He was busy with his practice and I don't suppose he'd time to be lookin' through his back window findin' out who was lookin' through theirs at wot was goin' on."

Mr. Gibbet cackled at his own humour.

"The pair of them were friends, weren't they?"

"Yes, I think they were. They were both natives of Caldicott and brought up together. And yet, you know, I'm sure Dr. Beharrell was frightened of somethin'. You know how you get a feelin' about somebody. A barber is in a good position for studyin' his customers, Mr. Cromwell. In the chair and under his hands, clients sometimes become an open book to 'im. He knows the state of their nerves and general constitution. The hair itself, too, h'often gives a man away. Limp, poor 'air, shows a nervous, limp physique, Mr. Cromwell. And vice versa, strong 'air and a steady nerve under the razor or clippers shows a good state of 'ealth. You'd be surprised."

"I am."

"You, yourself, Mr. Cromwell, have strong, steady nerves, but if I may say so, you are a bit fussy and particular. I get that from the care with which your fingernails are done, the spotless shirt and collar you wear, the careful way in which yore tie is knotted. A barber notices all these things, if he's worth his salt and intelligently interested in his clientele."

"We were talking about Dr. Beharrell being afraid of something, Mr. Gibbet. How did you know that?"

"As a barber, I found 'im very nervous and jumpy. 'Ad to watch him under the razor, else I'd have snicked 'im. Impatient when havin' his hair eut, too. But the main thing was a habit he had of seeming to look back over his shoulder, as though he was afraid of bein' followed. The way, too, he never left home for holidays. Now, to me, a holiday is the spice of life. I go abroad and come baek with new ideas about male and female 'airdressin', and with somethin' interestin' to talk to my customers about. But the doctor was always at home, always alone in that big house, as though haunted by somethin'."

"What do you think haunted him?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But, I think he was a bit afraid of Mr. Vincent Pochin, for some reason. It might have been about money or a natural sentiment about lawyers . . . I don't know. I remember one time, however, I was shavin' the doctor and I happened to say that Mr. Vincent

Pochin was going away for a three-week holiday to Switzerland. Believe it or not, Mr. Cromwell, I felt the doctor relax under my hand. He seemed delighted and gave a sigh of relief and the kind of tension I usually felt when he was in the chair, all went. Funny, wasn't it?"

"It certainly was."

Mr. Gibbet removed the large cloth and released Cromwell, shook away the hair, brushed the sergeant down, and indicated that the job was finished by asking him for half-a-crown. Two other customers arrived; a woman with a small child for his hair cut, and an old man with a white mane which would keep Gibbet busy for some time.

"Good afternoon, sir. Call again, any time. Most pleasant to be of service."

"Thanks, Mr. Gibbet. Happy times in Yewgsylvania," chuckled Cromwell, and hurried into the open air again.

The square had wakened up now. The usual occupants were lounging there in the sunshine, old men, nursemaids and mothers giving children their airings, and old ladies promenading with their dogs. The funeral party had returned and the door of Bank House stood open. Littlejohn was waiting for Cromwell in the lounge of the *Red Lion*.

They began to exchange notes and information.

"A pretty crowd of gossips in Upper Square, aren't they, sir?"

"They are, but it will all be useful. I like Gibbet's lecture on psychology from the barber's chair."

"Self-opinionated, repulsive chap. He doesn't seem to like Vincent Pochin."

"I'm sure with the vicar's story, and the odds and ends we've collected about Pochin and Beharrell and their relations, we've enough information to challenge Pochin. But he's been in the company of Brodribb all the day. I want a word with Brodribb, too, before he goes home. As Beharrell's brother-in-law, he should know quite a lot."

Littlejohn rose.

"I'll just go up to my room for some more tobacco. I'll be back in a minute. Then, I'll get across and meet Brodribb. Meanwhile, you might ring up the Yard. Ask them to find out all they can about Miss Lydia Horninglow, who

was a W.R.A.F. officer in the camp at Marehain-le-Fen some time during the war. They'll perhaps need to go to the Ministry for her record. At the same time, I'd like a list of commissioned R.A.F. officers stationed there when she was in camp. It might be a big job, but it's necessary."

He strolled into the hall. From where he stood he could see Hope standing in the public bar at the rear of the hotel. It was out of hours, but he was talking to some men who looked like brewery travellers lolling at the counter. Mrs. Hope was in the office doing her accounts. He went in his room on the first floor, took his tobacco, and left. The chambermaid passed with an armful of linen.

"Where is the landlord's private bedroom?" he asked.

She looked a bit startled.

"It's the room at the top of the next flight of stairs. It faces the square. When we're full, they move to the back. But they're down below at present."

"Thank you."

She passed on and entered a bedroom with her bundle.

Littlejohn climbed the stairs to the next floor. There was a door facing him. Number 11. He opened it and went inside. He ignored the room and its contents. It contained twin beds, which had been made. The place was tidied, too, but the windows were closed. It smelled of last night's sleep and of the perfumed powder Mrs. Hope used.

He crossed to the window and looked across the square. An even better view of Bank House than from the church tower. Here was the full extent of the room in which Beharrell had met his death. It only needed the light on and the whole scene would be visible.

In the large room in which Beharrell had spent his time, he could see Vincent Pochin and another man, presumably Brodrribb, lounging in chairs with a table between them. Tea things, a white cloth. He could even make out the glint of the silver tea service. He quietly returned to the ground floor. Cromwell was busy talking in the telephone box. He raised his hand in greeting to his chief. Then he hung-up and emerged.

"That's all right, sir. They'll get on with it. I said it was urgent. They'll try to get a list and send all the in-

formation by letter in time to reach us in the morning."

"Thanks, old man. Now, one thing more. Whilst I'm at Bank House, please go to the police station and get me a call through to Nice. The *Sûreté* there, and ask for Inspector Dorange. You can have a chat with Plumtree till the call comes through. Then send across for me."

He went out into the hall again. Hope was still talking to his companions at the bar. He'd been drinking and the conversation amounted to an uproar which Littlejohn could hear plainly from where he stood.

"If the brewery are interested and if they'll pay my price, I'll consider selling out. I'm fed up with hotel life. A man wants a bit of freedom, and at my age it's time I started to enjoy myself."

They all laughed and slapped him on the back.

Mrs. Hope was still in the office with the accounts in front of her. She was weeping bitterly.

## 11

## QUEEN'S COUNSEL

LITTLEJOHN halted at the door of the *Red Lion*. In the space of an hour, the weather had changed. It had grown sultry. Clouds had gathered and were approaching the town from all sides. Distant thunder rumbled and, as the Superintendent paused, wondering whether or not to return for his raincoat, there was a flash of lightning and the first drops of rain began to fall. Most of the regulars of the memorial garden had gone home to tea and the few who had remained, hoping the storm would blow over, now hurried away, the men turning up the collars of their coats. One by one, the lights of the square went on. In the drawing-room of Bank House, the lustre chandelier sprang into life.

Littlejohn put on his waterproof and hurried across. The door was closed and as he reached the shelter of the portico, two shattering claps of thunder sounded and the heavens opened. It was like pouring rain from a bucket. All the gutters overflowed and the wallflowers in the garden were flattened to the soil. The square stood completely empty, save for a mongrel dog, soaked and bewildered, which scurried across the road and entered the open door of the church in panic. At the windows of the offices and flats faces appeared, watching the sudden deluge, like spectators at a firework display.

Littlejohn knocked on the door with the huge brass knocker. The noise seemed to reverberate in a vast emptiness. Mrs. Trott appeared, gazed at the Superintendent in surprise, looked behind him in the flooded square, and bade him come inside.

"It's a good thing the funeral's over, sir. What a sudden change. It's almost like a sign from heaven . . ."

Littlejohn remembered she was a spiritualist and doubt-

less had ideas of her town about the continued potency of Dr. Beharrell.

"I'll tell them you're here . . ."

She took his hat and coat and hung them in the hall. Then she entered the drawing-room, returned, and asked him to follow her.

Vineent Poehin rose to meet him from the large Louis XIII armchair. He was dressed in black and a monocle with a black cord dangled on his chest. He looked older. Littlejohn was surprised at the change since last they had met. His step was slower and there was an unhealthy flush on his cheeks. Then the Superintendent's eyes fell on a crystal brandy bottle and glasses on a side table, and he understood.

At the same time another man rose from a similar chair on the other side of the fireplace. This one was fully in possession of himself. Dark, stocky, thick-limbed and brisk of movement, he had a pink, clean-shaven complexion and a bald head surrounded by a fringe of dark hair. An obvious legal type, who had retained a healthy preservation through taking good care of himself.

Poehin introduced them.

"Mr. Giles Brodribb . . ."

"I've been hearing a lot about you, Superintendent. I knew of you before this disaster cropped up, but never thought we'd meet in such circumstances. How's the case going?"

A crisp, domineering voice. Brodribb was the type who always tried to dominate the situation, as he'd done in court when in practice.

Poehin didn't give Littlejohn time to answer. He rang the bell for Mrs. Trott, just as if he were in his own home.

"Bring a glass for the Superintendent and ask my brother if he'll kindly step in here. Is Mrs. Taplowe-Smith still with him?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you tell him loudly enough that the police are here, she'll probably go . . ."

Poehin turned to explain.

"My brother, Samuel, is looking up some articles of

clothing for Mrs. Taplowe-Smith, who runs the Poor Gentlefolk's Society. She attended the funeral and asked . . ."

His voice trailed away. He was obviously not himself.

"Help yourself, Littlejohn. There's whisky and brandy on the table. Cigar?"

"I won't smoke for the present, sir."

"Then, please excuse me a moment. I must see what my brother is doing . . ."

Pochin left them and closed the door after him.

"Sit down, Littlejohn . . . Pochin tells me the purpose of your call is to see me. May I ask what about?"

Littlejohn felt nettled. It was obvious he wasn't wanted. Pochin and his crony, Brodribb, were enjoying a session with the bottles and cigars and the other Pochin was busy sorting out old clothes for a charity, already. It seemed they could hardly wait for Beharrell to leave the house before dividing his goods among themselves.

"Mr. Pochin, not I, suggested this meeting, sir. If it's not convenient, I'll leave it till another time."

"No, no. I'm going back to Peterborough this evening and I don't know when I'll be in Caldicott again. Have you anything to ask me?"

Outside, the rain was falling as heavily as ever. Flashes of lightning illuminated the sky and the square was almost as black at night.

"You often visited Dr. Beharrell when he was alive, sir?"

"No, I rarely saw him. We hadn't much in common."

They were interrupted by the arrival of the rest of the party. A brighter replica of Vincent Pochin, his brother Sam, followed an elderly woman in black, seventy or thereabouts, with brown dyed hair, a raddled complexion, and protruding brown eyes. She wore an out-of-date hat.

"Superintendent Littlejohn, of Scotland Yard . . ."

Mrs. Taplowe-Smith gently inclined her head to show she was aware of his presence.

"I must go. Samuel, please ask Trott to parcel the clothing and I will send Jackson round for it in the car. By the way, where is Jackson? He should have been here at five-thirty."

A French clock on the mantelpiece burst into a cascade of chimes and struck six.

"It's half an hour fast."

Vincent Pochin didn't seem to hear. His brother was doing all the arranging and now hurried to the window to see what had happened to the wandering chauffeur.

Littlejohn took a good look at Samuel. He was very like Vincent in build and colouring. His features were the same, too, but there was more life and energy in him. He was self-confident and had none of his brother's mental and physical flabbiness and self-pity. Sam seemed to allow Vincent to do all the talking and to take all the limelight most of the time, because Vincent's preoccupations weren't worth troubling about. When the occasion merited it, however, no doubt Sam could . . .

"It's terrible outside. Perhaps Jackson's been delayed by the storm."

"Surely not, Samuel. The vehicle is waterproof! Please look again."

"He's here. Just rounding the corner from the car park."

"In that case I will bid you all good afternoon. Trott will, of course, have an umbrella to hold over me as I go to the car?"

She went, leaving a faint scent of eau de Cologne behind her.

Littlejohn began to understand things a bit better. Brodrribb had said he hadn't much in common with Beharrell. Neither had the rest of the party he'd just met, and probably it extended farther into the upper ten of Caldicott, as well. The son of a bonesetter and the grandson of a farrier, educated at the local grammar school, he had lived a life of his own until Grace Brodrribb entered it. Then, he'd carried her off under the very noses of the decayed would-be aristocrats who despised him, and the brother who didn't approve of the match. In days of so-called equality, it was difficult to believe such a state of affairs could exist. But here it did, in the Taplowe-Smiths, the Pochins, the Gralams, the Brodrribbs . . . Had the Upper Square coterie succeeded in finally estranging the doctor and his young wife and then, when Beharrell had acted resolutely—for

Littlejohn was now almost sure he had killed both Grace and her lover—had they avenged themselves upon him?

"I seem to recollect inviting you to meet Brodribb whilst he was here at the funeral, Littlejohn. In case you wish to chat in private, my brother and I will leave you together for a spell. We have matters concerning the estate to attend to. So excuse us, please."

Vincent Pochin, without more ado, took his brother by the arm and led him from the room. Samuel Pochin hadn't exchanged a word with the Superintendent, except a formal acknowledgment of the introduction. This gave Littlejohn another idea. That the police here were regarded as part of the old tradesman class to be treated civilly on account of their power, and little else. Vincent Pochin was being polite and charming to the Scotland Yard men purely for his own ends. No wonder Beharrell had preferred the company and cosy fireside of Madame Alcardi to that of these anachronisms!

Brodribb was piercing one of the late doctor's cigars. He lit it, took a puff or two, sniffed it appraisingly, and sighed with content.

"I suppose that is Vincent's tactful way of leaving us alone together."

"You were saying, sir, you and Dr. Beharrell hadn't much in common."

Brodribb gave his cigar a battery of little puffs.

"I pride myself I'm a man of the world. Beharrell, on the other hand, was narrow. Always cooped up in this out-of-date town, engrossed in his medicine and his patients . . . He knew nothing of life."

"All the same, from what I hear locally, he did a good job. His patients liked him, he was a good doctor, and he didn't seem to interfere much in other people's business."

"In his own restricted fashion, I suppose he could have been a happy man. But he married a girl twenty years his junior and grew jealous."

"You objected to his marriage with your sister?"

"Of course I did. He was too old for a young spirited girl like Grace. And he wasn't of her class. She insisted, however. She was of age and always one for having her

own way. I told her she was making her own bed and must lie on it. She was infatuated by the admiration of an older man. She paid dearly for her mistake."

"They seemed happy for a time . . ."

"Until he grew jealous and tried to keep her all to himself."

"Or perhaps it was that the local people of her own class, as you describe it, sir, emphasised their differences in age, tastes and culture. Beharrell was a self-made man with a flair for good things in the home."

Littlejohn with a gesture indicated the furniture, the pictures, the silver, the old glass.

"She taught him all that."

"Then he must have been happy to learn."

"As for the suggestion that their friends discriminated between them, I know nothing about that, Littlejohn. I didn't visit them much. Grace and I disagreed, as I said before. I think the suggestion is rather an impudent one, however. Their friends were good to them."

They were getting nowhere. Brodribb resented being cross-examined, just as in the old days, when in court, he would have strongly objected had the witness he was bullying suddenly turned and begun to ask a lot of personal questions about himself.

"Had Beharrell any enemies?"

Brodribb looked annoyed. Littlejohn was spoiling his pleasure in the good cigar he'd selected from the box of best Havanas, treasured by his dead brother-in-law.

"All men have enemies. An officer of your experience ought to know that. If you're looking for a motive for the crime, I can't tell you of a single person who would have wished to kill my bother-in-law."

"I'm surprised, sir. I could name half-a-dozen already, and I've only been on this case three days."

"Well, you're more suspicious than I am, Superintendent. Do you actually *know* who committed the crime?"

"There was a witness who saw it actually happen, sir."

All the stuffing seemed suddenly to go out of Brodribb. He made a face as though his choice cigar had suddenly turned into a twist of smouldering brown paper. Then, he

einptied the glass of the doctor's Napoleon brandy he'd been sipping.

"Well, why the hell haven't you made an arrest? This business is getting on everybody's nerves."

"That's what I intend it to do, sir, until I've got a full picture of how and why the crime was committed."

"How long will that take, may I ask?"

"Not long now, sir."

Littlejohn strolled to the window and looked out. The storm had vanished as quickly as it had begun. The rain had ceased and the square now looked clean and fresh. At this hour, with all the professional occupants gone, a new population seemed to take possession. Caretakers who lived in the attics of the office blocks appeared, parading dogs which, during the day, must have been penned up under the rooftops. Other servants materialised dressed in their best, taking out their wives to the pictures or to see friends. From where he stood, Littlejohn could make out what seemed to be a small row of almshouses on the green behind the church. Old people were standing at their doors enjoying the freshness after the storm; others were taking little strolls in the square and precincts.

Cromwell was leaving the police station and briskly making his way across to Beharrell's door.

"What are you thinking about?"

Brodrribb seemed to have lost his gusto, as though what Littlejohn had revealed had shaken him with fear.

"I was just thinking what a pleasant old square this is and how full it is of queer people and queer passions."

"Well! I'll be damned! Instead of finding and arresting the murderer of Beharrell, you seem to be making a sociological study of Upper Square. What good will it do? Is this the new method of police procedure?"

There was a rousing knock on the front door. Mrs. Trott entered.

"Mr. Cromwell is at the door. He says you're wanted on the telephone."

"Excuse me, sir. I must go and see who it is."

"Are you coming back? Is there anything else you need me for? I must be getting back to Peterborough."

"Nothing more, sir. I'm glad to have met you. Goodbye."  
"Goodbye."

Brodrigg's voice trailed off in surprise. Here was a situation he'd not envisaged at all. The fellow had asked him nothing, when all the time he was a mine of information. The Pochins, his sister Grace, Beharrell . . . He could have told him a few things if only he'd kept his place and asked systematically and respectfully. Above all, respectfully . . .

Cromwell was smiling at the door.

"Nice are on the phone. I wonder if they've had a down-pour there. It's so plain, you might be speaking to someone across the street."

"Thanks, Cromwell. Whilst I'm away, just keep an eye on Bank House from the window of my bedroom. You can see all that goes on in the drawing-room. If anything unusual happens, get across there at once."

"Unusual?"

"Another murder, or anybody trying to run away."

Littlejohn hurried off to the police station. Plumtree was waiting beside the telephone, watching it in awe, as though it might explode or speak loud and oracularly at any moment.

"The South of France is on, sir," he said in a wondering whisper. Nothing like this had ever happened on his humble telephone before!

"Please go and keep an eye on the back of Bank House whilst I'm telephoning, Plumtree. See that nobody runs away. If anyone tries, stop them, and bring them here."

"But, sir . . ."

"Please do exactly as I say. I'll explain later."

He took up the instrument.

"*Bon jour, mon brave! . . .*"

After greetings and a burst of sociability and good friendship, Littlejohn got down to business with his old comrade, Dorange, of the *Sûreté* at Nice, 'the best detective on the Riviera.'

"You know the *Hôtel du Bon Pasteur* at Cagnes?"

"The *Auberge du Bon Pasteur*? Oui. Owned by Monsieur and Madame Liautaud. Good people."

"Their niece? *Oui.* Married to an Englishman? *Oui.*"

"Details of her relations with an English doctor about nine years ago? And the chauffeur who drove him there the following year and whom she married? I will enquire. The local gendarmerie will know. I'll ring you back at where . . . ? Please spell it . . ."

Meanwhile, Cromwell, behind the curtain of the Superintendent's room was watching all that went on at Bank House.

Vincent Poehin was in the room, looking completely flabbergasted. By his side, a man who might have been his double, except that he looked older and more self-possessed. They were being addressed by a stocky, domineering kind of man. From the pantomime of gestures and postures, Cromwell judged something very serious and very emphatic was being said, and Vincent Poehin wasn't taking it at all well. He milled around, emptied something from a bottle into a glass, gulped it down, dithered and looked like a marionette asking for advice. In reply to which, the man who was a bully laid down the law with vigour, pointed here, there and everywhere, asked him a lot of questions, which Poehin answered half-heartedly, and then pushed him through the door, followed him, and left the lighted room quite empty. Then the stocky man returned, helped himself to a drink, hesitated, and to Cromwell's surprise, brazenly took a handful of cigars from a box and put them in his pocket.

Cromwell watched the front door so eagerly that his eyes began to ache. At first, nothing happened. Then the door opened and the man who might have been Vincent Poehin's double appeared, looked out, eyed the square up and down like somebody expecting rain, seemed satisfied, and went indoors again.

Then everything began to happen at once.

The stocky man appeared suddenly, driving a Bentley from the ear park behind the church. He stopped at the front of Bank House.

Next, like a comedian entering a harlequinade, Plumtree peeped round the corner of the houses, nodded to himself, and emerged in the square.

The front door opened again. Stocky entered, and this time, out came Vincent Pochin, watched by his 'double.' Vincent was wearing a large coat and a soft black hat, and behaved furtively, like the villain in a melodrama.

Plumtree materialised, greatly to the astonishment of the three principal actors, who began to upbraid him and argue with him. Plumtree's gestures were first apologetic, then mollifying, then stubborn. He stood his ground as though he'd been set in glue. The men made as if to go back indoors. Plumtree then indicated the car and obviously brought to their notice the *No Parking* rule. They brushed it aside and the stocky man grew authoritative again, but without much luck. Plumtree kept glancing expectantly across at the police station, but remained like a police dog with its victims pinned down and helpless.

At length, the trio from Bank House lost patience. Stocky made a disrespective gesture of dismissal at Plumtree, and they all turned to go indoors. Plumtree followed them and the door closed.

Cromwell thought it high time to cross the square and find out what they were doing to the good Plumtree inside Bank House.

Littlejohn was just emerging from the police station, which now remained in sole charge of the imperturbable Haddock. Together he and Cromwell went and used the large knocker of Bank House again. Mrs. Trott answered it looking scared to death. They didn't bother to have themselves announced, but entered the drawing-room without ceremony.

"But the Superintendent said . . ."

"I don't care a damn what the Superintendent said. This is an outrage and you'll pay for it . . . Oh, it's you, Littlejohn. Will you kindly explain what all this nonsense is about?"

The Pochin brothers were silent and subdued and Brodribb was holding the floor in his best High Court style. You could see him gather his imaginary gown about him ready for the slaughter. Plumtree's helmet was on the back of his head and he was sweating profusely. But he looked to have taken root on the hearthrug, now.

"Mr. Vincent Pochin was trying to make off, sir." Brodribb swooped on him.

"Make off? He was leaving the house to go home. What right have you or anybody else to detain him against his wishes?"

Littlejohn spoke calmly.

"He did it on my orders, sir. I gave instructions that nobody was to leave."

"On what authority?"

"My own."

"Oh."

It was said with so much satisfaction that Cromwell couldn't contain himself.

"I saw all that went on. This gentleman . . ."

"The name's Brodribb, my man . . ."

"And he's a Q.C. . . ."

Everybody jumped to hear Sam Pochin speak. It was as if an attendant dog had suddenly started to articulate. And it was pathetic. Sam, trying to intimidate Cromwell by exalting Brodribb.

"Mr. Brodribb seemed to be telling Mr. Vincent Pochin something alarming and advising him what to do. He pushed him through that door. The next thing was, Mr. Brodribb appeared with Mr. Vincent's car. The three of them acted like a lot of conspirators and Mr. Vincent furtively got in the car. If he wasn't running away, he was acting very queerly. Then Plumtree intervened . . ."

Brodribb thrashed the air with an accusing finger.

"You had better be prepared to say all that later in front of the proper authorities, because I'm going to make it hot for all three of you. I shall . . ."

"Be quiet!"

"I beg your pardon, Superintendant."

"I said, be quiet. You have forced my hand and I must now ask you all to accompany me to the police station. No, don't interrupt. I propose to face Mr. Vincent Pochin with a witness who saw all that went on in the room above this one on the night of Dr. Beharrell's death. Mr. Vincent Pochin was seen to . . ."

But Littlejohn didn't get any farther.

With a noise like a little squeal, Vincent Pochin fumbled with his collar and tie, clutched his chest, and fell headlong unconscious on the hearthrug right at the feet of the astonished Plumtree.

# 12

## POCHIN CONFESSES

"Now take it easy. Tell the whole truth in an orderly fashion."

Brodrribb persisted in his court-room attitude and now spoke to Vincent Pochin in the smooth, caressing tone he had once used for addressing favourable women witnesses when he wanted to wring the heart-strings of the jury.

"Take it easy."

They had given Vincent Pochin another drink of brandy for his heart attack and he had slowly recovered. His brother, Sam, showed little concern about it all. He was used to it, it seemed.

"Even as a boy, he used to faint when father found him out doing wrong and threatened to beat him," he told Brodrribb, who had begun to act in the capacity of counsel briefed to get Pochin off, even before he'd been charged with anything.

Littlejohn insisted on their going over to the police station. It was now his turn to take the initiative and do the ordering around, instead of Brodrribb. Vincent Pochin started to declare his innocence before anyone had said he was guilty.

"I didn't do it. I swear I didn't murder Beharrell. I'll take my solemn oath I didn't kill him. My brother Samuel is a Commissioner for Oaths, and I'm prepared to swear..."

"Take it easy . . ."

Brodrribb clicked his tongue against his teeth in disgust at his client. He was like a murderer who kept letting his advocate down and shouting his guilt in the midst of an impassioned speech on his behalf before a judge and jury!

It was obvious why Vincent Pochin wasn't a prominent figure in his family law firm. He was unstable, almost hys-

terical in a crisis. No wonder his brother, Sam, always kept quiet. It was the apprehensive silence of a man on guard, wondering what his brother was going to say or do next, and wondering, too, how to get him out of the results of his folly.

"He was always a highly strung man. Even as a child . . ."

Sam kept intervening to show the evolution of Vincent from a spoiled and nervous child into an unstable and almost pitiable elderly man.

"He always got violent when he didn't get his own way. Once when he was only eleven . . ."

Brodrribb could stand no more of it.

"Be quiet, Sam. I'm conducting this case."

Cromwell smiled as he wondered what kind of a horrid little boy Brodrribb had been when *he* was eleven. He began to feel glad that all his children were little girls. Then, he guiltily remembered that he hadn't sent his eldest, aged six, the usual picture postcard, and hastily tied a knot in his handkerchief.

"I'd advise you, Littlejohn, not to charge Mr. Vincent Pochin with murder. You will regret it, if you do."

"May I take it, sir, that he has already given you full details of his behaviour on Friday last at Dr. Beharrell's?"

"He asked my advice . . . professionally, of course."

"You ought to have told the police, sir."

"I wanted to think it over carefully first. He only told me after the funeral. I will give you a brief résumé, without prejudice."

"Excuse me, sir, but I will question Mr. Vincent myself. I must remind you that you are only here on sufferance."

"I am here in my legal . . ."

"Mr. Vincent and Mr. Samuel are both lawyers, sir. They have no need, as yet, to brief counsel."

"Really, Littlejohn, I protest."

"Unless you allow me to conduct this matter in my own way, without interference, I shall have to ask you to leave, Mr. Brodrribb."

Brodrribb carefully took a cigar from his pocket and pierced it. He lit it in a series of short puffs, fixed it in his mouth, and then caught Cromwell's eye. Cromwell nodded

sagely and Mr. Brodribb was suddenly aware that Cromwell knew, somehow, whence the cigar had come. It completely discomfited him and he sat in Plumtree's old chair, crossed his legs, and resigned himself to a mortified silence.

"Mr. Vincent . . . I must warn you that you need not say anything about your share in the Beharrell affair, but that if you do, your statement will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence."

The word 'evidence' stimulated Mr. Brodribb.

"Eh . . . You're not charging him, are you? Because, if . . ."

His voice trailed away. He was struggling to keep his dignity and finding it hard.

"I want to tell you everything, Superintendent. Believe me, I do. I know the law about these things and I'm grateful for the caution you've given me. But I want to tell you everything and get it off my conscience."

Vincent Pochin was a pathetic figure. He looked ten years older. Quite unlike the dapper, self-controlled man Littlejohn had once met for the first time on the late train. He didn't look guilty, though. Only very confused and very afraid.

"Let me tell you what I have assumed so far, from enquiries we have made, sir. During the war, Dr. Beharrell's wife vanished with an R.A.F. officer. Beharrell said she'd fallen in love with him, left a note behind for her husband, and fled. Nobody ever saw the note which Beharrell stated he found when he got home and discovered her flight."

"That is so."

"Nothing was heard of Mrs. Beharrell or her lover again."

"You are speaking of my sister, sir, and I have a right to remind you that I am interested in all you say."

"If I speak disrespectfully of the dead, Mr. Brodribb, you are quite entitled to call my attention to it. Otherwise, I'd be grateful if you wouldn't interrupt."

"Look here . . ."

Cromwell eyed Brodribb's cigar with a slight frown. When the Q.C. tried to give it a nonchalant puff, he found

it had expired, and he began to make a pantomime of re-lighting it.

"To resume, Mr. Vincent . . . I have no doubt all kinds of things were said about Mrs. Beharrell's total disappearance. Some satisfied themselves with the theory that she and Cranage must have got to London and there been killed by a bomb and not identified. Dr. Beharrell seems to have encouraged that idea."

"He did."

"But you didn't believe it, did you? You had loved Grace Beharrell for a long time, resented her marriage with someone you regarded as her social inferior, and tried, along with others in your set, to come between her and her husband . . . Forgive this plain speaking. If you wish us to carry on this interview alone, please say so, and I'll have the room cleared."

"You'll what?"

"I said I'll have the room cleared, Mr. Brodribb."

"You needn't. I'll clear myself, at least. Good day to you."

Brodribb rose and made for the door.

"Don't leave, sir. I haven't finished with you, yet."

The barrister turned with a face black with fury.

Sam Pochin, who had been standing by, fascinated by the story which was unfolding, grew exasperated.

"For God's sake, Brodribb, be your age and keep your dignity. My brother and I are badly in need of your support and counsel, but don't keep interrupting the proceedings at the wrong time. As a friend, I beg you to restrain yourself. Sit down and listen, please, there's a good fellow."

"Oh, very well. But I warn you . . ."

"Yes, yes. You warn us and we accept the warning. But please let the Superintendent get all this over. Vincent is suffering torture. Please continue, Littlejohn."

Outside in the passage, they could hear the heavy measured feet of Hubbard enter the premises and walk through to the constables' quarters. Someone must have been sitting quietly there eavesdropping, for Hubbard cheerfully addressed him.

"Hello, Edgar. Any tea brewing? I could do with a cup."

Plumtree slammed the door of the private room with a crash heard all over the square. Outside, a rag and bone man with a donkey and cart passed the entrance. The donkey began to bray . . .

"My God!" shouted Brodribb to nobody in particular.

"You, Mr. Vincent, had your own theory. Instinctively, you felt something was wrong and you were anxious to get to the bottom of what happened to Mrs. Beharrell. You are a highly-strung, sensitive man, with keen intuition."

Vincent Pochin gave Littlejohn a grateful look, but said nothing.

"Your theory was that Beharrell had come upon his wife and her lover together, perhaps in a compromising situation. He was a jealous, impetuous man. You surmised that he had killed them both in a rage."

"How did you know?"

Pochin said it as though relieved to find someone who understood his years of torture.

"By the same way *you* found out. Deduction. There could be no other explanation. Nobody saw Mrs. Beharrell's letter to her husband. Nobody saw her and Cranage the night they were said to have fled. Nobody ever saw them again. The chances of their both being completely annihilated by a bomb are very remote. They couldn't have left the country because of the war."

"Yes . . . yes . . . yes."

Pochin punctuated Littlejohn's points by little grunts and murmurs of assent.

"You determined to put your theory to the test and make Beharrell pay for his crime if you were right. The question was, what did Beharrell do with the bodies?"

"That was it. What did he do with them? Do you know?"

"Yes. He threw Cranage down the well, and at the first chance, he had it filled up and sealed in by an ornamental well-head. You suspected the well, but you couldn't test your theory. You began to buy the property in the square. It became a mania with you. You pretended you were investing your money in rents and in the houses you

loved because of their antiquity. Actually, you were slowly surrounding Beharrell with a net of property you owned. Finally, you got the houses on either side of Beharrell's. You hoped to gain access to Beharrell's house and well some day. You had keys of the houses on either side and as they were lock-ups, Gralam's and Gibbet's, you could enter and watch all Beharrell did. You could also overlook him from your own premises and you made a flat there and lived right on his doorstep. Why didn't you move nearer and kick out either Gralam or Gibbet?"

"They both have long leases and wouldn't move. I couldn't find any excuse for getting them out."

Vincent Pochin answered petulantly. He wasn't afraid now of the whole of his crazy schemes finding the light of day. In fact, he was pleased and relieved about it all.

"Your patience was vast. You made the investigation your sole hobby—your life's work. Then, at last, you got a break. The water board wanted Beharrell's well. Right into your hands. But Beharrell proved stubborn."

Pochin jumped at the word.

"But I was as stubborn as he was. I insisted that the board forced him. After all, the community wanted water, didn't they?"

Samuel Pochin looked flabbergasted.

"I always wondered why you kept on and on at Shillinglaw to press the board to force the issue. You were very convincing, Vincent."

"So that was why the board were so emphatic. Persuaded by you, your partner grew as stubborn as Beharrell."

"Yes, I did it . . . I persuaded Shillinglaw. Quietly, of course. Nobody had to know why I did it."

"The well was finally re-opened. You watched every move of the excavators. Did you know what went on?"

"Yes, I watched from my own rooms and from behind the gardens. I saw the workmen dig up the first bone of the body. I saw Baldry assemble the bones and sneak them into Beharrell's. I sought out Baldry. He wouldn't tell you that, even if you asked him, because I told him what I'd seen him do and that I'd get him sacked if he didn't tell me

the whole tale and keep his mouth absolutely shut for good after he'd told me. He then gave an account of the skeleton of a man he'd found. An anatomical specimen used by Beharrell in his student days and cast down the well because the doctor didn't know how otherwise to get rid of it."

Cromwell looked closely at Pochin, whose brother and Brodribb were also watching him with astonished eyes. The long strain of bringing retribution to Beharrell had driven Vincent Pochin off his head, and Littlejohn's revelations had finally broken through his cunning reserve.

"You knew at once that the bones were those of Cranage."

"I did."

"But where were those of Grace Beharrell? The well had been bottomed again and they weren't there. There was only one other place."

"Yes, yes . . . That was it. The old disused strong-room, Superintendent. That was very clever of you after so short a time."

"Your game of cat-and-mouse with Beharrell started all over again. Out in the open, under public and his own view, the well was, or so Beharrell thought, inviolable. Inside, in the house, the strong-room, funny enough, wasn't as safe as one would think. So Beharrell never left the house long enough for anyone to get at it. Oh, I admit you tried, Mr. Vincent. You tried hard. Years didn't count. Your patience was inexhaustible. You became quite an expert housebreaker. But Beharrell was a better burglar alarm. He caught you at it over and over again. He must have dearly loved his wife, for he never seemed even to contemplate getting rid of her bones."

"But he didn't know who I was. I disguised myself."

"When he was a boy, he used to like dressing up. He was always a good mimic and actor," chuckled Sam.

Brodribb groaned. He was sure he was dreaming . . . a nightmare. That was it! A nightmare. Cigars, which he thought he was pinching unseen . . . The tale Vincent Pochin had previously told him, quite simply, that he was sure Beharrell had killed Grace . . . And now, here was

Pochin revelling in all the details, boasting even how clever he'd been dressing up as a burglar, probably in whiskers or a mask and a false moustache, and breaking in houses . . . Yes. A nightmare. He'd wake up in his cosy bed in Peterborough and find it was all a silly dream . . . He re-lit his stolen cigar and determined to take it easy. His own advice. Take it easy.

"You played hide-and-seek for years trying to get at the safe and open it. But Beharrell always came back too soon. You even spied out the land in Gibbet's cellar and had an idea of getting in Beharrell's premises by pulling down the dividing wall."

Pochin chuckled.

"Yes, I did. It was over a yard thick. No use, that. I got in through the area door again and Beharrell came for me with a revolver. I thought my number was up that time."

"Finally, the doctor's mother died. Surely, you thought, this is my chance. He's bound to stay there for some time with his own mother lying dead and without another relative in the world. But Beharrell knew that watching his strong-room was more important."

"So much the worse for him."

"The house was empty. Mrs. Trott away and Macfarlane on his rounds. You made a final desperate attempt. By this time, you were an expert at breaking in Beharrell's. He daren't tell the police, for fear of betraying his secret. He had to be his own watchdog."

"It took me two hours to open the door. It was easy once I'd got a leverage with the crowbar."

Samuel wasn't satisfied.

"How did you get in?"

It was like a couple of boys telling tall tales and exciting one another.

"I'd got a key to the back door. I saw to that once when I broke in through the bathroom window and was chased out. I ran down the stairs and through the back door which I unlocked in my flight. There was a key on the inside of the lock. I wasn't in too big a panic to forget that key might one day be useful. I took it . . ."

"You entered the back door . . . What then? . . . Tell me, Vincent."

"I found the cellar door locked and no key. I'd either to break it in or . . . And I suddenly remembered the door at the back of the old wardrobe. I knew of its existence from the old history of Pochin's Bank. I went up and got to the safe down the stairs. I opened the safe, and . . . and . . ."

He couldn't go on. He paused, horrified.

Littlejohn resumed.

"You found the remains of Grace Beharrell there."

Brodribb was on his feet pawing the air. This wasn't a dream! It was horrible reality.

"You mean to say Beharrell *murdered* Grace!"

As if they hadn't been telling him that all along!

"My God! I wish he were alive. I'd kill him with my own hands. Or, no . . . I wouldn't . . . I'd denounce him and I'd prosecute him in court. I'd beg to be allowed to do it. I'd drag him through the mud. I'd make him sweat . . . I'd . . ."

Brodribb slumped down sweating and panting himself, a broken man at the horrors of his own imagination. His sister murdered . . . And buried for years in a strong-room in the house across the way. Brodribb got up and walked about in a frenzy again and then, putting his hand in his jacket pocket, he found Beharrell's cigars. He took them out, tore them into shreds as though tearing Beharrell limb from limb, and cast their hated remnants all over the floor. Plumtree's eyes stood out like organ stops. He'd never seen anything like this before. The trouble was, that when poor Plumtree told his wife in bed that night, including many dramatic incidents in which he figured and scenes which he dominated, she fell asleep half way through, and he didn't discover it until he'd got to the end and was waiting for her applause!

Brodribb was disgusted.

"You simply told me that you quarrelled with Beharrell and *hit* him. Do you call that fair, Pochin? You ought to have told me the full story . . . I wash my hands of it . . . But, Grace . . . I'll never get over this. It's a nightmare."

He sat down again, found he'd still got a cold cigar in his mouth, and flung it across the room.

"I found Grace . . ."

Pochin was sobbing quietly.

"She hadn't been buried alive there, had she . . .? Don't say she'd been . . ."

"No. Not that, Brodribb. There was no sign of that."

"What did you do with her remains? You ought to have let me know . . . It's an outrage."

Littlejohn interrupted quickly.

"Let us get on . . . You found the remains . . . Then, Beharrell came back . . . You killed him with your crowbar."

"I didn't . . . I didn't . . . I didn't kill him . . . I came up to the bedroom, found a sheet, returned, and wrapped poor Grace's remains in it. As I reached the top of the secret stairs to take them away, Beharrell appeared at the door of the bedroom. He was mad with fury. Like one possessed. He didn't even pause . . . He flew at me as soon as he saw me. All I'd thought about was disposing of the poor bones of Grace decently. I didn't even think at the time of Beharrell or killing him. But I wasn't having any interference."

Pochin gulped.

"I was never any use at violence, but I was always afraid of someone doing me injury. So, when I was younger, I took a course of ju-jitsu with a Jap, who lived in Caldicott."

"Oh, yes. The man who used to test the sex of chickens."

Sam Pochin was almost as simple as his brother. He couldn't stop explaining every detail left half done. Cromwell shrugged his shoulders at Littlejohn. He gave it up!

"That was the man, Sam. You remember him. He taught me. Beharrell went for me. I pushed him back and he staggered towards his dressing-table. I thought he was going to a drawer for a revolver. I remembered a trick the chicken man taught me. I gave Beharrell two chops with the side of my hand at the top of the spine. He fell like a log."

"And you slugged him with the crowbar!"

Everybody jumped. It was Plumtree putting in his motto. He couldn't wait for the tale to go on.

"No. I didn't. I left him there. All I wanted was to give dear Grace a proper resting-place and leave her in peace. I left Beharrell unconscious on the bedroom floor. I didn't care . . ."

This was just what Canon Horninglow had seen from the tower! No more and no less.

"I didn't care about Beharrell. Blast him! I'm glad someone else came and murdered him, just as he'd done to poor Grace . . ."

Brodrribb was up again.

"What did you do with the remains, Pochin? Tell me at once. I hope you didn't put them in the well again . . . Because, if . . ."

"Of course I didn't, you fool. I took them to our family vault. That's where she would eventually have rested if she'd only listened to me and not chosen Beharrell instead. I read her the burial service and then I laid what remained of her in a vacant casket and left her there."

"You'd no right to, Pochin. You should have informed me. I'm the one to decide what to do with the remains of my family."

It was more than Plumtree could bear. A lump had risen to the good sergeant's throat at the thought of poor old Pochin who'd never married because of unrequited love of a lady, and who'd avenged her at last and laid her decently to rest. It reminded him of the gruesome novels he used to read when a boy. And now, here was Brodrribb spoiling it all.

"Oh, shut up!" he cried, thrusting his face in that of the Q.C. "Shut up. You spoil everythin', you do. If you don't shut up, I'll lock you up . . . S'welp me, I will . . ."

He paused, suddenly realising what he'd said and done. Brodrribb couldn't believe his ears. A mere bobby, now, giving him cheek! Yes, it was a nightmare.

Outside, a dog was howling in the square and in the constables' room there was a commotion going on. A knock on the door of the private-room and Hubbard's head appeared.

"Excuse me, sergeant . . . Hope at the *Red Lion's* got the D.T.'s, and he's set the place on fire."

Smoke started to pour past the windows of the police station.

# 13

## JIMMY-IN-THE-WELL

THE interlude created by George Hope was soon over. Littlejohn, leaving Vincent Pochin in the charge of Cromwell and his brother, hurried with Plumtree to the *Red Lion*, to find peace and quiet restored there. Hope, it seemed, had been drinking heavily and had finally climbed to his own bedroom with a bottle of whisky, locked the door, and made himself violently drunk. Then he'd started to smash up the furniture. Not content with that, he had tried to light a cigarette and had set fire to the curtains. His wife had found a duplicate key for the door, and enlisted the help of two customers and Doctor Macfarlane. Now, order prevailed and Hope was sleeping under a sedative.

"'Ope 'as somethin' on his mind these days," was Plumtree's sage opinion, as the pair of them returned to the police station.

Littlejohn did not reply. He was thinking of the distraught state of Claudine Hope and the desperate, fearful look she had given him when he arrived at the hotel after the commotion was over.

"I'd like to see you some time soon," he had said to the doctor, who was busy packing his bag.

"How about after surgery tonight? Say nine o'clock. I'll be in, sir."

"That will suit me, doctor."

Dusk was falling and the square was empty. The air was fresh after the storm and the scent of the battered wall-flowers was pleasant. The place seemed too peaceful to harbour in its gaunt old grey houses so many passions and emotional cross-currents.

At the police station, things were just as Littlejohn had left them. Cromwell was smiling slightly to himself, from which Littlejohn guessed the remaining three men had

either been quarrelling among themselves or trying to bully him. The reason became manifest right away.

Brodrribb, looking like a turkey cock, met Littlejohn almost head-on.

"Look here . . . How much longer is this going on? I've got to get home. I can't be wasting my time here like this."

"You can go as soon as you like, sir."

"But you said you hadn't finished with me."

"I've changed my mind, sir. You can go if you wish. I'll get in touch with you if I need you again."

Brodrribb was speechless for a minute.

"You'll not hear the last of this. I'm going right away, but I'll see to it that your impertinence isn't overlooked. I've friends at the Home Office . . . Where's my hat and coat . . . Oh, damn it! I've left them at Beharrell's."

"May we go, too, Superintendent?"

Samuel Pochin was acting as spokesman for his brother, who now seemed thoroughly dazed. But Brodrribb was going to make a proper exit, instead of creeping away.

"You'd better come with me, Pochin. Both of you. The police can't hold you."

"All the same, sir, I haven't quite finished with them."

"I'm going across to Bank House and I'll wait ten minutes for them there. If they haven't appeared by then, I shall ring up the Chief Constable at once."

He stalked out and slammed the door and that was the last of Brodrribb. He felt the need of some more of Beharrell's old brandy and made straight for the bottle when he reached Bank House.

"You wanted us? Are there any more questions?"

Sam Pochin seemed embarrassed by his brother's account of his tussle with Beharrell. He thought it best to ingratiate himself with the police for Vincent's sake.

"Why did you try to run away after you'd told Mr. Brodrribb the story of your encounter with Beharrell, Mr. Vincent?"

"Eh?"

Sam took up the tale.

"He's not himself. I can answer that. We were afraid if you came and questioned my brother, you would arrest him

on suspicion. Brodribb had advised him that the truth must be told, but Brodribb said my brother had better go home before you arrived and *he* would tell you everything and fix matters up."

"But why didn't Mr. Vincent stay and make a clean breast of it all? Why run away and hope that Brodribb would somehow persuade me to leave your brother in peace?"

"It's our mother, you see. She and Vincent and I live together. She is over eighty . . . Eighty-four, to be exact, and anything like this . . . I mean, if she got to know that Vincent had been arrested, or even of his share in the Beharrell tragedy . . . Well . . . It would kill her. Her heart . . ."

Vincent Pochin seemed to wake up.

"I couldn't have mother upset by all this, Littlejohn."

He said it defiantly as though he proposed to resist arrest at all costs. He looked like a barnyard cock getting ready to crow.

Littlejohn filled his pipe and lit it.

"Very well. You may both go, for the present. But I shall hold you responsible for your brother's behaviour, Mr. Samuel. No more running away . . . Nothing stupid . . . You understand?"

"I promise, Littlejohn, and I'm grateful."

Vincent drew himself up to his full height.

"You have my word."

"I think I ought to tell you both that the scene between you, Mr. Vincent, and Dr. Beharrell was witnessed by Canon Horninglow from the scaffolding around the clock."

"Ha!"

Littlejohn looked Vincent Pochin in the eyes.

"What is the meaning of that?"

The two brothers looked at each other questioningly.

"You'd better tell the Superintendent, Vincent."

"Very well . . . No use withholding anything more. The canon, although I'm a warden of his church, hates me. I suppose he told the police right away."

"No. He sent anonymous letters to me, to Plumtree here, and to the Chief Constable of the Soke."

"He would. Didn't want to get himself involved, but couldn't resist getting one in at me."

"Why does he bear you a grudge?"

"It's more than a grudge. I was once engaged to his daughter, Lydia. It was after Grace married Beharrell. When war broke out, Lydia insisted on 'doing her bit' as she called it. She joined the W.R.A.F. We were going to be married when it was convenient. I admit, I was in no hurry. Once engaged, she began to order me around. She was a masterful woman."

Sam Pochin coughed.

"Never mind that, Vincent."

"Very well. I'll make it brief. She joined the W.R.A.F. and at camp met some young blood and fell for him. She must have fancied he meant marriage and stopped thinking of me. She soon found there was a child on the way . . . And then the fellow turned out to be married. Her father was distracted. Tried to persuade me to go on with the marriage and, after the child had been born, to get it adopted in some distant place and carry on as though nothing had happened. It didn't suit me that way. I helped them all I could. What else could I do? I was sorry for the old chap. Lydia went away and the baby was born. I found it a home through a friend who's interested in adoption societies. But there the matter ended. I said I couldn't go on with the engagement after that. Lydia and the old man took it badly. They must hate me past all telling. But you couldn't blame me, could you?"

Nobody answered the question. Pochin sounded so self-righteous and cold-blooded about it. None of them, not even Sam, had any sympathy to spare.

"So that's probably why they told the police about the matter."

"What did you expect them to do, sir? Hush it up?"

"Not exactly. The canon did it for spite, and not only that, he wrote to one of the best detectives in the country at Scotland Yard. He wasn't taking any chances of my not being found out, was he? Did he mention my name?"

"No. But I found out that he wrote the notes and I insisted on a full story. He didn't wish to give your name."

"So *he* said. He wanted you to do all the work and no blame to attach to him."

"That will be all, sir. You can both go."

"Eh?"

"I said you may both go."

"Oh . . ."

The two brothers left without more ado, Sam solicitously helping Vincent out, just as he'd always done since they were children.

"I'll look after him, Littlejohn."

"By the way, the Coroner will be informed about the remains of Mrs. Beharrell, which your brother placed in your family vault."

"Very well. Shillinglaw is our brother-in-law. He will attend to everything."

The door closed.

Plumtree coughed.

"Will there be anythin' more, sir, for now?"

"Yes. You might please advise the Coroner and the police surgeon at once about Mrs. Beharrell's remains. I want to know the cause of death if that is possible, after the body, or whatever is left of it, has been identified."

"Very good, sir. If I may say so, too, it's after your dinner time, sir. Whatever happens at the *Red Lion*, Mrs. Hope always sees her guests is well fed."

Plumtree was right. They put on a good meal for the few guests at the *Red Lion*. Mrs. Hope was, however, nowhere to be seen. She was, presumably, engaged in the kitchen and in looking after her unruly husband. They were served by a smiling flat-chested waitress, one of the ageless types who work in remote country hotels, who took a fancy to Cromwell.

"Don't have the steak-pie. It's the remains of yesterday's joint. The mutton's good . . . And there's a bit of nice Stilton, too. We keep it for special customers who know a good cheese when they taste one. I'll get it."

"You seem to have made a conquest, old man."

The life of the hotel seemed to be flowing more slowly. They had to wait for their main course. The maid apologised to Cromwell.

"There's been a bit of trouble this afternoon, sir. The boss isn't himself and it's put things a bit askew. I'm doin' my best."

Littlejohn lit his pipe over coffee.

"I'd better get across and see Macfarlane. I'll leave you to write to your family while I'm away. I'll have to telephone to my wife. Can't seem to find time for a letter."

At home at Hampstead, Mrs. Littlejohn would probably have the windows of the flat wide open enjoying the cool air. The dog would be following her around as she made an evening meal for herself. In her slippers and housecoat, with perhaps a tasty omelette frying in the pan . . .

The telephone rang. It was Dorange. The gendarmerie post at Cagnes confirmed the visits of Dr. Beharrell to the *Auberge du Bon Pasteur* nine years ago. A bit of a task, but the police records of hotel visitors showed it all. It had been common gossip that Claudine Liautaud had been Beharrell's mistress. He had promised her rather straight-laced uncle, who kept the hotel, that he would marry her. However, he'd returned next year accompanied by a chauffeur, and Claudine had preferred the chauffeur to his master and left for England to be married to him. Her aunt and uncle had quarrelled with her about it, and she had not visited them since. That was all . . .

The square was still quiet and deserted. Plumtree tramped past on his final patrol. A woman with a large bunch of lilac made her way towards the town. A few stars were showing overhead, lights appeared here and there in the upper rooms where the caretakers lived, and in Beharrell's old home. Someone was playing the organ in St. Hilary's. Littlejohn crossed and knocked on the door of Bank House.

Mrs. Trott led Littlejohn into the room he had seen before, which stood behind the dead doctor's drawing-room and had been made into Macfarlane's den. The doctor was sitting in a comfortable chair in front of the gas fire. He rose to greet the Superintendent.

Littlejohn had not seen Macfarlane at such close quarters before. A tall, well-built, athletic man in his early forties. A long, craggy, clean-shaven face, square features, a large

straight nose, and a heavy fleshy mouth. The eyes were greenish grey and a little too close set. But the thing you saw first was the shock of stiff red hair cut *en brosse*.

Macfarlane shook hands and waved Littlejohn into a chair on the other side of the fire. He took glasses and a whisky bottle from a corner cupboard.

"You'll have to take it with water, Superintendent. Things are in a muddle here and we've run out of accessories, execpt tonic water, which is an abomination with whisky."

No trace of Scottish accent; no trace of any accent at all. Just a vigorous, monotonous voice, with a slight lisp.

"With the old doctor dead, I suppose you're very busy now, Dr. Macfarlane . . . Good health . . ."

"Good health, Superintendent . . . Yes, I'm busy. It's the largest practice in Caldieott and subject to the formal approval of the National Health people, the doctor left it to me. I reckon I'll have to get some help to see me through. An assistant or else one of these new apprentices."

"How long have you been with Dr. Beharrell?"

"Thirteen years. I ought to have been a partner by now. However, he paid me very well."

"You got on well together, doctor?"

"Very well indeed. He was a good scout. I hope you soon catch his murderer. It was a foul trick to kill him in his own house."

The curtains were drawn and the gas fire hummed quietly. Outside, the sounds of caterwauling in the back garden.

"You like Caldieott, sir?"

The doctor took another good drink of his whisky.

"Yes. I've been here a long time and I've never had any inclination to move. I guess I'll have to settle for the rest of my life, now. Have you seen much of the place since you've been here, sir?"

"Funnily enough, no. We've been so occupied in Upper Square that we haven't had time to go down town at all. My colleague went to a football match the other evening, but I've not stirred away from the square since I got here."

"Interesting place, Upper Square. Quite cut off from the

lower town. There's a sharp rift between the two, as well. Although the old aristocrats who used to occupy it have been replaced by monied people of a different sort, this square is still a bit select. Expensive hats, tailors, medical and surgical consultants, the best hotel, the lawyers. The kind of things the working-classes in the town below profess to despise, but secretly admire a little. Dr. Beharrell, of course, had a large working-class practice. He understood the humbler folk; he came from their class himself. That's why they're all interested in this murder case. Had it been one of the Pochins or Gralam who'd been killed, the people in the lower town couldn't care less."

Macfarlane filled up the glasses again and Littlejohn began to smoke his pipe.

"It's a small town, doctor?"

"Yes. A little more than three thousand people. Our practice extends into the farms and houses of the countryside, too. Yes, it's a small place. It's so limited that it seems silly to take a car out of a garage to get from one side of it to the other. But that's what people do in Upper Square. Just as, in the old days, the patricians of Caldicott drove to church in their carriages from one side of the square to St. Hilary's on the other. There are little snobbish coteries here, too. The survival of traditions seems strange in these days, but it goes on."

"Everybody knows everybody else and all their business?"

"That's true, Superintendent. You'll doubtless have found yourself how much people here know of the private life of the late Dr. Beharrell, for instance?"

He looked with a trace of cunning in his eyes at Littlejohn.

"Yes, that's right. May I ask if *you* have any idea who killed Dr. Beharrell, sir?"

"None whatever. Have you, sir?"

Macfarlane lolled back in his chair and took another good swig of his whisky and water.

"Not exactly. We've discovered that the doctor and Mr. Vincent Pochin had a fight in the doctor's bedroom just before the doctor died."

"Did they, now? And them old friends. It must have been something very serious to cause them to come to blows."

"It was. I'll tell you in a minute. Meanwhile, are you the Pochins' doctor?"

"No. They have a fellow from Peterborough. One of their own class. The Pochins regard themselves as the old aristocracy. They came of a family of bankers who once lived in this very house. A queer lot. In my comings and goings in Caldicott all the years I've been here, I've heard a bit about them. There are, in the lower town, you know, quite a number of working-class folk who can trace their ancestry much farther back than Pochin. They know all about the Pochins."

"Such as?"

"Well . . . There's said to be a trace of madness in the family. Pochin's father committed suicide. And then there's Uncle Willie. Uncle Willie went round the bend years ago and was put away in a home. Vincent is a queer neurotic stick, too. A bit of an old *roué*, dissolute, although to see him in his smart suit and his shiny shoes, you'd think he was just a nice old gentleman. He's a dandy—a poseur. He's haunted by the thought of madness in the family. Some people say that's why he never married. That, of course, isn't true. He'd have married Mrs. Beharrell if he'd had the chance. The old doctor once told me that in a burst of confidence."

"Did Dr. Beharrell take you into his confidence much?"

"Quite a lot. He was a lonely sort of man and sometimes, on the odd occasions when we weren't too busy and got together over a glass of whisky, he'd expand."

"Did he ever mention his wife and what happened about her?"

"No. I got the tale from the usual sources, down town. They supply all the information I need there."

"I've heard that Dr. Beharrell had affairs with other women after his wife's disappearance. Do you know anything of that, doctor?"

"Yes. He was friendly with Madame Alcardi, the singing mistress across the square. I wouldn't say she was his

mistress, though. Then, there was Mrs. Hope, at the *Red Lion*. There's no doubt they were more than friends. They knew one another before she came to live here after she married Hope, who used to be the doctor's chauffeur. People say the doctor did poor Hope a shabby trick there. No wonder Hope took to the bottle."

"Was it going on when Beharrell died?"

"Yes, I think so."

"In front of everybody? I mean, did Mrs. Hope visit this house in full view of the *Red Lion*?"

"Not in full view. After dark. Always after dark."

"But what about Hope? He'd surely have found out."

"Have you seen Hope after ten at night, sir?"

"Yes. He was drunk."

"He's drunk nearly every night."

"But it didn't start that way, did it, when Hope and his wife first settled in the *Red Lion*, surely?"

"She used to pretend to go to Peterborough once or twice a week, but she came here after dark. Then she went home about the time the last train was due in . . . just around midnight."

"It's incredible!"

"No, it isn't. They had it worked out to a fine art. I know, because I lived in the house and saw it going on. They didn't know I was aware of it. Mrs. Hope had a key to the basement door, let herself in, and went right up to Beharrell's bedroom by the secret stairs and in at the door behind the wardrobe."

"You know of that, then?"

"Of course. I've been in the cellar and seen the way the old bankers used to get down to their money-chest privately. I'm interested in old houses and their history."

"And Hope never . . ."

"Of course Hope knew. He owed the doctor a lot of money, though. Beharrell financed the setting-up in the *Red Lion*. And it cost a packet, I can tell you. It wasn't brewery property but I have some of the brewery executives as my patients and they've carefully assessed the value of the renovations. I know where the money came from. About £8,000 pounds all told. The Hopes bought

and gutted the place and made it up-to-date."

"And all that, I presume, to get Mrs. Hope here from France to be at the beck and call of Beharrell. He must surely have loved the woman. Why didn't he marry her himself?"

"He once told me he'd never marry again. In the first place, he didn't know his first wife was dead; and in the second, he really hated women at the bottom. The doctor also told me that Hope paid 5% on the mortgage and it was a good investment. Besides, it wouldn't have done for a man in Beharrell's position to have married a comparatively young woman like Mrs. Hope. A French girl, too, it would have ruined him locally. She'd never have made a doctor's wife."

"Not his class . . . The old story of Upper Square. And yet, he was prepared to betray his old servant, Hope."

"It was like Beharrell. A perfect cynic, although as far as I am concerned, he was the best friend I ever had."

"Speaking of his wife . . . Have you any views about what happened to her when she disappeared?"

"Not really. There is a tale in town that she and the fellow she ran away with were killed in a London air-raid. On the other hand, people hint that the doctor found them together and murdered them. The latter tale, of course, is the gruesome thing that strikes the fertile imagination."

"That was before you came here, doctor?"

"Yes."

"Were you here when the burglaries occurred?"

"Yes. I remember them. I wish I could have got hold of the persistent devil who kept breaking-in. I'd have given him something to remember. As it was, it was always the doctor who got there first and missed the man."

"I can tell you who it was, doctor."

Macfarlane sat up straight.

"You can?"

"Yes. Vincent Pochin."

Macfarlane roared with laughter.

"You can't be serious! Well, well. So he had to turn burglar to make up his income. What was he after? The silver? But it's preposterous! Pochin? Why? Who told you?"

"Pochin did. This afternoon at the police station, when I questioned him about his fight with Beharrell. But you mention making up his income . . . He's a wealthy man, isn't he?"

"Not to my reckoning. He seems to have spent most of his fortune in buying up old property in this square. He might have thought it a good spec. But it wasn't. The rents are mainly controlled and it's old buildings that need a lot of upkeep. I'll bet if he gets one per cent on his money, he's lucky. And then, look at the rate he lives."

"But aren't they a wealthy family?"

"They were reputed to be, but a lot of once wealthy families are poor nowadays. Death duties, cost of living. And Pochin has always lived very expensively. Look at his flat . . . It must have cost a packet. I've been there a time or two. He used to meet his lady-loves there . . . The caretaker on the top floor is a patient of mine. She's shown me the place. Then there's the big old house he and his mother run in the country."

"But you can't be sure, doctor. This is all surmise."

"It is, of course. But it isn't surmise that, at times, he's been so hard-up that he couldn't pay his housekeeper her money on the nail and she had to wait till he could raise it. Of course, he didn't tell *her* he was broke. He said he hadn't been to the bank, which meant, he was waiting to raise the wind from Sam or from Shillinglaw. You ought to call and see Mrs. O'Brien. That's the housekeeper. She married two years ago and left the Pochins. Another of my clients. Lives in Horsefair Street, in the lower town. Number fifteen."

"Thanks. One of us will call and see her . . ."

"You said you'd tell me what it was that caused the fight in the doctor's bedroom between him and Pochin, Superintendent . . ."

"Yes. It looks as though the doctor did kill his wife and her lover, after all, doctor. Do you remember the trouble about the well in the garden?"

"Of course. Beharrell didn't want it disturbed. I didn't blame him. After all the trouble he'd taken filling it in. It looked very nice. And then to have a lot of local jacks-in-

office digging it up to get a few gallons of water. It was a scandal."

"Did you know that when they opened it up again, the excavators found a man's skeleton at the bottom, which, it is presumed, was that of Mrs. Beharrell's lover?"

Macfarlane burst into roars of laughter and rolled about in his chair.

"Excuse me, Superintendent, but that's just too funny for words. Mrs. Beharrell's lover! That's a good one! That skeleton was known as Jimmy, was stored in the loft for years, and was one Beharrell had when he was in medical school. I threw it down the well myself."

"You . . . "

"Beharrell wanted to get rid of it and couldn't be bothered to sell it. He couldn't very well put it in the dust-bin, so I chucked it down the well for him one night."

Littlejohn was stunned. This surely put his theories of the crime completely out of joint! But there was worse to follow.

Macfarlane filled up their glasses, still chuckling.

"They didn't find Mrs. Beharrell's body along with Jimmy, did they, sir?"

"No. But Pochin found it."

It was Macfarlane's turn to goggle in astonishment now.

"Pochin's purpose in breaking in was to find the body, he told me. You see, he was in love with Mrs. Beharrell before she married the doctor, and having an idea that Beharrell had murdered her, he was anxious to avenge her. He was trying to get in the old strong-room in the cellar. Finally, he managed it and found her remains. He was emerging with them, it seems, when Beharrell arrived on the scene. That was the cause of the fight."

Macfarlane beat the arms of his chair in impatience.

"But that's simply ridiculous . . . I've been in the strong-room myself. Beharrell took me down. He had a key, the only one there seemed to be, and he used to keep it in his pocket."

"How long ago?"

"Last autumn, I think. There was nothing there except a tin box full of old banknotes which Beharrell said were

those of a local firm which went bust. Pochin's Bank must have got them some way . . . Let me see, Beharrell knew the history of it. If you wanted to break a rival bank, you collected all the notes you could and presented over their counter more than they had money to cash. They couldn't pay them, and had to suspend payment, which meant liquidation or bankruptcy officially and . . ."

Littlejohn wasn't listening to banking history. He was thinking of Pochin's tale about finding the bones of Mrs. Beharrell and burying them in the family vault.

"And there was nothing else there, you say, doctor."

"No. If Pochin says there was a body or something, he's a liar. Another of his mad fits, I suppose. You don't mean to tell me Beharrell would have risked taking me there if there'd been a murdered body in the strong-room . . . It's ridiculous."

Littlejohn was saved from an awkward situation by the telephone ringing. Macfarlane rose wearily to go to the hall.

"I suppose it's for me. No peace for the wicked."

But it was for Littlejohn. Cromwell wanted him.

"Could you come over to the *Red Lion* right away, sir? Mr. Sam Pochin's rung up to say his brother's just tried to commit suicide. Went in the bathroom and opened a vein in his arm. Only, just like him, he didn't make a proper job of it. He's in the local hospital having a transfusion and he's in no danger."

"All right, old man. I'll come right away . . ."

He felt cheered up at the very sound of Cromwell's voice, which however, continued with another tale.

"The Coroner rang up, too. They found the bones where Pochin said he'd put them. In an empty casket in the family vault. It seems it's in the churchyard at St. Hilary's, a very old place like a chapel where you get in with a key. All the Pochins from the time of Adam are buried there."

Whose bones were they? Littlejohn could imagine Pochin reading the burial service over them in the dark earthy mausoleum. Would it be by candlelight in the established manner of old-fashioned melodrama? Pochin certainly had

a good imagination, even if he were off his head!

The voice of Cromwell went on, however.

"The police doctor's on his toes, and no mistake. He told the Coroner that he'd need a Home Office expert to check his findings, but in his opinion, the skeleton tallies with a woman like Mrs. Beharrell. He even rang up old Brodribb at Peterborough. I bet he was mad at being disturbed again!"

Littlejohn could hardly refrain from telling Cromwell to cut out the fun and games and get on with it.

"It seems Grace Brodribb broke her arm when she was a girl. Brodribb said she fell downstairs. Stumbled over his foot as they were playing, as children. I bet he tripped her up . . . Brodribb described exactly where the break was . . . The doctor found the fracture tallied on the bone of the skeleton . . . So it's ten to one that it's her . . . Are you there, sir?"

Yes. Littlejohn was there, but he didn't quite know where he was.

## 14

## RAGS AND BONES

"WHY did you do it?"

Littlejohn was sitting by the bedside of Vincent Pochin at the local cottage hospital. The case was not serious, for Sam had found his brother in time to prevent his losing much blood. Sam always seemed to find him in time! There had been a brief transfusion and Vincent would be able to go home in a couple of days. Meanwhile, in his usual neurotic way, he behaved as though any breath could be his last and lay in bed like a dying man.

"I was just at the end of my resources. After all these years to find Grace's remains . . . just a skeleton."

"Although you'd expected something of the kind?"

"I admit it, Littlejohn, but reality is sometimes worse than expectations. And then to be accused of killing Beharrell . . . You did me a great injustice there, Littlejohn. I thought you'd have known me better than that. I'd looked like being at peace at last. I'd found my poor Grace and laid her to rest. Then you came along . . ."

Pochin closed his eyes. His brother, standing at the foot of the bed, glanced at the Superintendent and shrugged his shoulders. The sister-in-charge had said they could stay as long as they didn't exhaust the patient.

"Don't you feel fit for further talk, sir?"

Pochin languidly opened his eyes again.

"I want to tell you everything, Littlejohn. But I didn't kill Beharrell. I swear it. If you arrest me, it will kill my mother. The shame of it would finish her. Rather than that, I wanted to end my life. She'd get over that better . . . Sam said . . ."

Sam interrupted in his usual fashion, with irrelevancies.

"He's tried it once before, you see. Sleeping tablets. He's very highly strung and suffers from melancholia now and

then. I'm sure he won't try again. If only this cloud could be cleared from him, he'd settle down . . .”

Littlejohn would have been prepared to bet Vincent didn't take enough sleeping tablets to kill him! Just sufficient to cause a commotion and attract everybody's undivided attention for a while.

“This cloud . . . This disgrace . . .” muttered Vincent without opening his eyes.

“Are you sure you found the body in the strong-room?”

Vincent opened his eyes suddenly.

“You're surely not accusing me of being a liar as well as a murderer. Of course I found the body. I . . .”

“I believe you, sir. Now, what did Dr. Beharrell say when he met you coming from the secret staircase?”

The change of subject acted as a tonic. Pochin almost sat up in bed. His eyes lit up. }

“He said ‘So it's you,’ is it? After all this time, you've done it at last. And I suppose you intend to get me hanged for it. Inform the police, eh? Well, you never will. You're going to join Grace in the vault. That's what you've always wanted, isn't it? To join Grace . . .’ Something like that, it was.”

Pochin, in a firm voice, declaimed the melodramatic scene between himself and his old rival. He was enjoying it!

“And then what?”

“He went across to the chest of drawers. I told you, I thought he was going to get out his revolver. So I hit him in the way the Jap had taught me.”

“The one who used to find out the sex of chickens,” added Sam almost instinctively.

“What time was that, sir?”

“It's funny isn't it, how even in moments of peril, you observe little things. I noticed the Guildhall clock was striking five just as Beharrell and I faced each other in silence and I remember thinking how the clock at St. Hilary's had struck the same time five minutes ago when I'd come up for the cloth in which to place poor Grace's remains.”

“You opened the door behind the wardrobe on entering and left it open?”

"No. I closed them behind me. Anyone might have entered and then the open door and wardrobe would have betrayed me. The wardrobe was easily drawn back to its original place. After all, it was constructed on a pivot for such a purpose, if necessary. When I returned for the cloth in which to place the remains, I opened them again."

"You never had a key to the strong-room?"

"No. Beharrell must have had them all, if there was more than one. It may be there was only one key made . . . for security's sake."

"What was the body like when you first found it?"

Pochin closed his eyes and then, bracing himself, opened them again.

"It lay in one corner, decently composed, as though Beharrell had, at least, dealt reverently with it. It must have been left naked, presumably to make it decompose more quickly or to confuse its future identity. The scoundrel! It was nothing but a skeleton."

"He's had enough, Superintendent. It's half past ten."

Sam Pochin interrupted, opened a gold hunter, showed them the time, and snapped the case to again.

The sister arrived to tell Littlejohn he was wanted on the telephone.

It was Plumtree.

"Can you come right away, sir? There's been another murder. In the square in front of the church. A hawker called Watson, this time."

Plumtree was snorting with emotion and, in his confusion, alternated between his posh and his everyday voices.

"I'll come right away."

It wasn't far. The hospital was in an enclosure behind the church and the waiting taxi covered the ground in a few minutes.

The square was ominously silent, save for a group of men standing round the front of St. Hilary's. The gas lamps threw a pale green glow on the pavements, lights shone here and there in the windows and through the fanlights of the old grey houses, and the silhouette of the bronze soldier was just perceptible, frozen in perpetual readiness to charge down Sheep Street.

"Hullo, sir. Another murder." Cromwell's voice from the gloom.

At the very door of the church, a knot of officials was gathered round a human form stretched on the pavement in the semi-darkness between two lamps. One hand hung in the gutter, the other above the head in a helpless, pathetic posture. The legs spreadeagled across the parapet. A pair of old shoes with the soles worn through and naked flesh visible between them and the bottoms of the frayed trousers, for the body wore no stockings. An ambulance stood nearby, turned so that one of its headlamps fully illuminated the scene.

"It's a hawker . . . a rag-and-bone man called Watson, though locally nobody knows 'im by that name. His nickname's Tommy Drop, because he's always got a drop on the end of 'is nose."

Plumtree whispered hoarsely. With him were the police doctor, another constable, Cromwell, and a few silent civilians who seemed to have materialised from the darkness around.

"When was he found?"

"Half an hour ago."

"I found him as I was coming out of church. I'm choir-master and it's practice night. The boys had left half an hour earlier so he must have been killed between their leaving and my letting myself out. I stayed preparing the music for Sunday."

Littlejohn couldn't see the man, who, however, spoke in a tired cultured voice.

"He must have been brought from elsewhere," said the police surgeon, the same who had given evidence at Beharrell's inquest. A tall, white-haired, energetic man who never wore a hat and had old-fashioned pince-nez on his nose.

"I'd think on first examination, that he'd been dead more than a couple of hours. Around eight o'clock, I'd say at a guess . . . Usual way. Blunt instrument, perhaps a poker. The skull's been fractured by a shocking blow. Look!"

Under the blazing light, he raised the head from behind, for the body was face downwards. All the hair on the

crown had been smashed into a pulp of bone and brains.

"Horrible! The work of a monster—Yes, a monster!"

The choirmaster sobbed it out.

Other people and faces appeared one by one in the beams of the headlamp. Everybody who entered the square seemed attracted like moths to the gruesome glow.

A couple of journalists arrived in a little old car and then a van containing experts from Dofford. Flashlamps began to snap and two local detectives started to search round the body for clues and other odds and ends.

"Who is he?" asked Littlejohn of Plumtree.

"Tommy Drop? He's a chap who makes a tour of Caldicott two or three times a week gatherin' rags and bones, bottles, jars and such like. Old iron, lead, clothes . . . Most people are glad to get rid of such rubbish for a copper or two. He collects and sorts them out in a shed near the Town's Yard. He stables his donkey and cart there, too. I don't know what 'e was doin' in these parts at this time o' night. He's usually in the pubs. Lives in a dirty little cottage near his stables with a lot of cats . . . He was up to no good here at this late hour, believe me . . ."

"Had he a police record?"

"Yes. Drunk and disorderly mostly, though he's done a stretch or two for receivin' stolen goods and pinchin' lead from old buildings."

"Nothing else? In that case, take the body to the mortuary. I'll deal with it tomorrow morning. Arrange for Hubbard to assist as usual, Plumtree," interposed the surgeon.

The doctor was anxious to be going. Hubbard, on account of his phlegmatic and accurate slowness, always represented the law at his autopsies.

The journalists were here, there, and everywhere seeking details of the crime.

"I was just coming out of church after the choir practice . . ."

The tired voice of the organist sounded from the gloom of the periphery, telling his tale for the third time.

The ambulance left and its red light disappeared down Sheep Street. The party slowly broke up. Plumtree clung to

Littlejohn and Cromwell, for he felt the importance of his official status and his collaboration with Scotland Yard. Not a detail missed him. He piled them up in memory ready to retail them later to his wife in bed.

"Could it be an insane killer, a homicidal maniac?" he asked in an awful voice, remembering a story he'd once read in a book from the circulating library at the end of the street.

Littlejohn was silent for a minute.

"Do you know where Watson lived, Plumtree?"

"Yes, sir. I told you, near the Town's Yard. It's only two minutes away. I'll give the whole place the once-over first thing in the mornin'."

"Let's go now."

Plumtree breathed hard. He thought of the fleas and other vermin which Watson's dirty little shed harboured, as well as the fetid cottage which stank abominably of cats.

"If you wish, sir . . ." he said half-heartedly. They walked there, through narrow silent streets illuminated now and then by an odd electric lamp, naked on the top of a wooden standard.

Watson occupied the last standing property on a spot called Angel Meadow. Anything but a meadow now, but in the old days it had held the *Angel Inn*, with a paddock of grazing ground behind. Now, the plot was sour and dirty, the property all demolished except a solitary cottage in which Watson had lived, two up and two down, with a stable adjoining and an old barn which the rag-and-bone man used for his store.

"It's been condemned, sir, and is due to come down any time. It was left until the council could find Tommy Drop alternative accommodation."

No need for more explanations, they were at the door of the cottage. In the stable they could hear the donkey moving about and, as they stood there, the darkness dispelled round the door by Plumtree's torch, the animal began to bray.

"He's not bin fed, sir. That's what he's after."

The door was locked.

"Use your shoulder, Plumtree."

"If you say so, sir."

Two heaves and the door gave way at the lock. A horrible stale blast of cats and filth met them as they opened it. Inside, the gas had been cut off, but there was an oil lamp on the table, which Plumtree lit after two attempts. The room was indescribable. Bare boards for the floor, a cheap bare table with dirty cups and screws of paper from which Watson had eaten his last meal. A few embers in the untidy hearth from which the ashes hadn't been removed for weeks. A bed of sacking and old blankets in one corner on the floor. And scattered about the place, wide-eyed from the light, four or five cats of all colours and sizes. One had three kittens under the table. A fierce ginger tom glared and spat at Plumtree, who made noises at it and drove it from the room into the dark. Two others began to mew and rub themselves round the bottoms of Cromwell's trousers. He bent to stroke them, whereupon they clawed at him in ecstasy and he had to chase them off.

"I think we'll accept your suggestion, Plumtree," said Littlejohn, hastily lighting his pipe and handing his cigarette-case to Cromwell and Plumtree. "You can give the whole place the once-over tomorrow."

Plumtree didn't seem at all amused or repelled either. It was simply in the way of just being another unpleasant constabulary duty. One thing was quite certain to Plumtree, however. He daren't tell his missus he'd been in Tommy Drop's flea-ridden house that night. Otherwise, she'd refuse to allow him the privilege of her bed until he'd had a bath, changed his underwear, and performed upon all his clothes with D.D.T.

"Let's look in the store place."

Even worse! Plumtree groaned inside him.

They had to break in there, too. A large single room, vast and incredibly dirty. Rats scuttered away from the light of the torch, cobwebs festooned the beams and wooden walls, damp and rot added the atmosphere of decay to the general stink of old wood, rusty iron, filthy cast-off clothes, rags, and old oil. The roof leaked and there were pools of water here and there from the earlier storm. Two of the cats had followed them and were capering after rats and

mice like demons. Piles of scrap iron, woollen and cotton rags, tin, copper, and other rubbish stood where Watson had perfunctorily sorted and left them.

Littlejohn took Plumtree's torch and shone it around. Here and there, the beams caught the gleaming eyes of the cats and of a bold rat or two, which stood transfixed by the sudden commotion. There was a workman's bench by the door, in a space among old bedsteads, bed irons and garden seats. The throw-outs and unguarded rubbish of Caldicott, which Tommy Drop had collected, lawfully or otherwise, and accumulated like a thieving magpie.

The bench held the more precious items sorted out from the general mass of refuse. Lead piping, copper and brass valves and plumbing connections, boxes of brass and copper screws, some unused tins of corned beef and tinned fruit rifled from dust-bins, old electric light bulbs, a car accumulator, a motor-horn.

And lying apart from the rest, a piece of lead piping, almost a foot in length, with a bulge in it, where a plumber had mended a burst. Then, another fracture too formidable for repair. So the piece of piping had been subject to a major operation, and cut out of the main pipe, in which a new section had been inserted. Littlejohn gingerly picked it up. Then he examined it more closely under the torch. Two or three grey hairs were embedded in the ragged unrepaired burst in the pipe. He looked at Cromwell and at Plumtree, who was breathing deeply as he struggled to remember every detail of the investigation to report to his missus later.

Littlejohn wrapped up the piece of lead in an old newspaper from the bench. Then he handed the parcel to Plumtree.

"Take good care of that, Plumtree. See that the police lab. at Dofford get it first thing in the morning. Ask them to examine the two or three hairs wedged in the crack in the pipe, and tell me if they are Beliarrell's or Watsons."

They had to force the door of the stable, too, and then Plumtree fed the donkey and gave it water to drink. The place was as foul as the rest of the buildings, a mere hovel which leaked and let in wind and weather. The animal

stood patiently watching its benefactor's ministrations, and nuzzled his hands as he gave it hay, and then drank copiously.

"We'll send the R.S.P.C.A. up to you in the mornin', old girl," said the sergeant to the donkey, which seemed to understand, had taken a fancy to him, and didn't want him to go. It brayed forlornly as he closed the door.

"Thank you, Plumtree," said Littlejohn as they reached the door of the *Red Lion*. There was a light on in the hall of the hotel and they bade the sergeant goodnight as St. Hilary's, after a commotion of chimes, struck midnight.

Mrs. Hope was waiting for them in her office. She was just sitting there, doing nothing, looking distraught.

"How is your husband, Mrs. Hope?"

"Better, sir. He's asleep. He's not been himself for some time. He is very unhappy."

She seemed to be expecting Littlejohn to say something in reply, but he waited, looking her in the face. There was tragedy written all over her good looks, her eyes were red and tired, and little lines had gathered round them.

"We both wish to speak with you tomorrow. It is too late tonight, and my husband is not fit for an ordeal of any kind, just now. Tomorrow, then? Your suppers are ready in the dining-room. I will make you some coffee now."

She hurried away to the kitchens. Littlejohn and Cromwell sat at the table eating their beef sandwiches in her absence.

"I think . . ." said Cromwell, and then he paused. They could hear the noise of heavy feet descending the stairs. Slowly, one foot at a time, they drew nearer, paused in the hall, and then an apparition appeared at the door of the dining-room. It was George Hope, his trousers drawn over his pyjamas, his hair dishevelled, his eyes wild. He pointed at Littlejohn.

"I want you. I want you. I've somethin' to say to you."

He licked his lips and staggered a few paces nearer.

"Whatever my wife says, I didn't kill the doctor. I swear I didn't. I've got to tell you what happened, or else I'll go

off my chump. I'll do away with myself if I don't get it all straightened out. I want to make a clean breast of it all, now . . . now."

"Sit down, Hope. Your wife's making some coffee. A cup will do you good."

Hope stood where he was.

"She won't speak to me. She thinks I killed Beharrell. If I can't convince her and you I didn't, you might as well take and hang me. I don't want to live any more. Life's been 'ell enough lately without bein' accused of a murder I didn't do."

In his pyjama top, trousers with braces dangling behind, a pair of heavy shoes over his bare feet, his hair tousled, and his eyes with heavy bags under them, Hope looked a comic figure everywhere except in his eyes, which were tragic and appealing.

"Sit down, I said."

Hope joined them gingerly and sat on a vacant chair. His wife appeared, almost dropped the coffee, and looked at the three men wild-eyed.

"Please get cups for you and your husband and join us. We're going to have our little talk before we go to bed. And then we can all sleep . . . Please do as I say."

Without another word, Claudine Hope left the room.

"That's a change," said Hope. "She's actually not looked at me as if my 'ands was red with blood."

He looked despairingly round the room as though he'd never seen it before, and started to whimper.

# 15

## GEORGE HOPE CONFESSES

WHEN Claudine Hope returned, her husband suddenly grew aggressive and his misery left him.

"Tell them what you've been accusin' me of . . . They might as well hear it from you as from me."

She didn't say a word, but poured out the four cups of coffee and handed a glass of old brandy each to Littlejohn and Cromwell. There was none for her husband or herself.

"Tell 'em."

Hope was growing excited.

"Perhaps you'd better, Mrs. Hope."

"Very well, Mr. Littlejohn. It can be done in few words. On the night of Dr. Beharrell's death, just after five o'clock to be exact, I saw my husband in the doctor's bedroom. I wanted something in our own room and I went up for it. I didn't put on the light, and I happened, as I often do, to look out. There was a light on in Dr. Beharrell's bedroom and I distinctly saw my husband lift up the limp body of Dr. Beharrell, strike him again and again, and then drop him and creep away. I was horrified."

Hope raised his head and snarled.

"No need to be. You know I'd reasons enough for breaking every blasted bone in your precious doctor's body, but I didn't."

"I said I was horrified."

Hope might not have been there. His wife simply looked through him.

"I ran out of the room at once and across to see what had happened. I rang the bell, but nobody answered. I was just going to go for the police, when I saw my husband come round the corner. He must have left by the back entrance of the doctor's house. I followed him here, accused him of killing Dr. Beharrell. He denied it. He will tell you

his story, I have no doubt. You may believe him if you like. I never will. I saw it with my own eyes. His fantastic excuses are like a fairy tale. Ingenious, but mere excuses."

"Think what you like. I don't care what *you* think."

Hope flapped his hand in his wife's direction.

"For years she's deceived me with Beharrell. She's a lot to talk about committing crimes! Do you know what she says? She says that unless I confess to the murder of the doctor before anybody else is arrested, she'll tell you everything herself. 'Get on with it,' I said, and I got as tight as a drum and set the bedroom on fire. Didn't I, Claudine? And now I'm goin' to tell you my story, Mr. Littlejohn, because I'm fed up with all this arguin'. Not because she wants it, but because, if you don't believe me, you can arrest and 'ang me, see? I might as well be 'ung as nagged to death. And if you do believe me, she's goin' down on 'er bended knees and beggin' my pardon in front of the both of you, and then I'm packin' my bag and goin'. I don't know where I'm goin', but anywhere out of the way of her, the she-devil."

Claudine Hope sat like a figure of stone, sipping her coffee, taking no heed of her husband's shouts.

"Are you ready? Well, it's this way, and I'm wrappin' nothin' up. Until we took over this place, I was Dr. Beharrell's chauffeur. Ten years I was with 'im, except the three years I spent in the army from 1940 till I was wounded and invalided out. I was engaged at the time to the nicest girl you ever saw, and when I think of 'er and what's 'appened to me since, I feel like puttin' me ruddy head in the gas oven . . ."

He paused and gulped down his coffee. St. Hilary's struck one.

"... Instead, I killed her. Dr. Beharrell was in the habit of lettin' me have the use of the car on my day off, and I used to take Bessie—that was my girl—on runs in it with me. One day, we went to Peterborough, met some friends, and I took a drop too much. I had a smash-up, ran the car into a telegraph pole, and killed my girl. There was a court case, and I was up for drunk in charge of the car. If it hadn't been for Dr. Beharrell, who, lucky for me, was

the doctor sent for to the accident, sayin' I wasn't drunk at all, in spite of the fact that I was, I'd have gone down for a stretch for manslaughter. As it was, I got dangerous drivin', the Quarter Sessions said it was a bad case, and I got twelve months and my licence suspended indefinite. They'd no need to suspend my licence. I never wanted to drive again after what I did to Bessie, and I swore I wouldn't."

Hope paused, dashed his hand across his face, and looked at his wife.

"Can I 'ave a drink . . . ? Whisky?"

"No."

"To 'ell with you, then. Where was I? The year I was doing time, the doctor had to drive himsclf on holidays. He went to France, didn't 'e, Claudine? And there he met her ladyship. A pair of proper love-birds, they was, it seems, and with a view to carryin' on in England where they left off in France, they hatches an idea, and poor old George is the bloomin' mug. When I come out of gaol, the doctor is most kind. 'What are you goin' to do now, George, on account of not bein' able to drive any more?' he says and he provides the answer. The *Red Lion* is goin' cheap, and do you know why the breweries haven't a chance to buy it? Why, the doctor has bought it himself. He's bought it to stop Mr. Vincent Pochin buyin' it. Mr. Vincent, it seems, has developed an 'obby of buyin' up all the property in the square and the doctor isn't goin' to have him ownin' the *Red Lion*, where, by standin' at the window, Mr. Vincent can overlook Bank House and see all the doctor does."

The tale was thereupon interrupted by the appearance of a young policeman, who thrust his head round the door, looked astonished, and was about to withdraw.

"What the 'ell do you want, Cudlip?"

"I saw the light as I was doin' my patrol and wondered if it was all right."

"Well, it is, see? Good night, or good morning, whichever you prefer."

"I was only doin' my duty."

"So you were, Cudlip, and there's no need for rudeness on the part of Mr. Hope, who apologises, don't you?"

Littlejohn smiled blandly at Hope.

"Oh, very well. I'm sorry."

"That's all right. Good night all."

"Where was I? Oh, yes, the doetor suggested I took over the *Red Lion*. He'd renovate it, bring it bang up to date, and set me up. 'All you need, George, is a good wife to support you?' I said I didn't. I'd lost Bessie through my own damn fault, and I didn't care for another. And then, he tells me there's plenty of time, and that he's goin' to France for a holiday and will I come with him. That was just after the war, before the doetor took to always stopping at home and never takin' any more holidays. At first I declines, see? I can't drive and he knows it. 'Don't worry about that, George,' he kindly says. And tells me *he'll* drive. He *enjoys* drivin'. I'm to do the mechaniekings, and generally odd about with the garages. It seemed O.K. I was at a loose end, so I went. We lands up at the *Bon Pasteur*, Cagnes. We stays a month, and the landlord has a lovely nieee. A peach. I admit it. A peah. She seems to fall for me right away. I'm flattered a bit. The doctor suggests what a fine landlady of the *Red Lion* she'd make. Jokin' like, but it sinks in. I end by askin' her. She jumps at it. Didn't she, Claudine?"

No answer. Instead, Mrs. Hope rose and brought a box of cigars and offered one each to Croinwell and Littlejohn, who lit them.

"What about me?"

Hope snatched one, bit off the end, and started to smoke, too.

"It later turns out that it's all a put-up job between 'em. All they want is to be together in Galdicott. She won't make a doctor's wife, espeially as the doetor don't know whether or not he's a married man, on aeeount of his wife havin' run away. But she's good enough for George. Oh, yes, and she can still carry on with the doctor, on the q.t. I wondered why her uncle seemed a bit funny when I asked him if I could take her with me and marry her. He refused. So we eloped. It was funny . . ."

Hope took savage puffs at his cigar which had gone out, lit it again, and began afresh.

"We married and settled in."

"And I was as faithful to you as any woman could be. I admit the doctor was my lover that first summer when he came to Cagnes, but after I consented to marry you, I told him that it was all ended between him and me."

Hope didn't seem to hear his wife's interruption.

"About three years after, a pal of mine here wanted to take his family to the South of France. What more natural than me recommendin' the old *Bon Pasteur*? They went and 'ad a real good time. But my pal comes home with a very funny tale. It seems it's all over the place about my wife and the doctor. As soon as he mentions them and me, people start to laugh. One night when he's had one over the eight, my pal gets confidential and tells me the whole tale. I threatened to push his face in, but I understood, all the same, why Beharrell was so keen on me and Claudine gettin' married."

"Instead of coming to me and asking or accusing me, you began to drink heavily and associate with loose women. I stood it as long as I could. The doctor always pestered me and, at last, I yielded in despair. He, at least, was kind to me and I was in a strange country."

"How sad! Do we all start to cry our eyes out now?"

"That will do, Hope. Get on with your story. It's late."

"I carried on at first as though nothin' had happened. We stopped livin' as man and wife; just went on workin' and losin' money on this blasted white elephant of an hotel. Then, one day, it came to me what a mug I was. Everybody laughin' at me behind my back. So I went across to see Beharrell. I told 'im I'd break every bone in his blasted body if there was any more of it. He laughed at me and denied it. Said I was jealous. She'd been visitin' him as a patient. A patient! I ask you . . . I told him agen what I'd do. It stopped for a time, then. A week or so ago, it all started again . . . or I found it out again. She said she was goin' to Peterborough. I kept my eyes open and, sure enough, at the time the last train was due in, she was leavin' Beharrell's by the basement door."

"I have told you, he had done what you asked. He left me alone. In fact, he had grown keen on Madame Alcardi,

who would have none of him, however. So, he tried to take up with me again. He said he would foreclose on the mortgage here. I went across to plead with him. I went to Peterborough, but returned early. I had to keep it from you. You were angry and unreasonable, and would have left this place after all our work here, if you'd heard of the threat."

"Why didn't you tell me? I'd have killed him. I'd 'ave swung for him as I ought to've done long ago."

"You were never sober. I knew you'd do something rash."

"Never mind that, now. I decided to have a showdown with Beharrell. I went over last Friday about five in the afternoon, when I knew he'd be in for his tea. The place was deserted. I tried the back, and the door there was loose for some reason."

Littlejohn nodded. Pochin had left it unlocked on his way in.

"I went in, intendin' to wait. I'd screwed myself up and wasn't goin' back. I heard noises upstairs, so I went up to what I knew was Beharrell's bedroom. I thought I'd catch 'im there. It was empty. Just as I was gettin' ready to leave, I heard the front door open and close. And, at the same time, believe it or not, the sound of feet climbin' stairs somewhere behind the bedroom wall. It sounds crazy, but wait till I've finished. You'll see . . ."

Hope mopped his forehead with the sleeve of his pyjamas and licked his lips.

"I suddenly thought how sick I'd look if I was caught in the bedroom. There'd been rumours of burglars in Upper Square and I stood a good chance of being accused of the lot. So I nipped inside the big built-in wardrobe that would hold five like me, and I waited my chance to get away. S'welp me, if a minute after, the wardrobe didn't start to move of its own accord, like one of those things at a spiritualist sittin'. It was as much as I could do, not to rush out and risk bein' caught. However, I held my breath and waited."

Hope puffed at his cigar and paused to light it again.

"Somebody came in the room from a secret panel, or a door which I found after was a secret one, hidden behind

the wardrobe, switchcd on the light, messed about a bit, and then went out, leavin' me and the wardrobe as we was, somewhere in the middle of the room it seemed to me. I was just goin' to make a bolt again, when I heard the main door of the room open and the feet on the secret stairs at the back of the wardrobe comin' up again, slow and heavy, this time. I couldn't believe it wasn't one of those daft nightmares you have after a 'eavy supper, or a comic stage play whcre they keep chasin' one another in and out of doors . . . The two men met. I 'eard the doctor's voice, wild with rage, shoutin' the odds at somebody. And then, blow me, if Mr. Vincent Pochin's voice doesn't answer and start cursin' the doctor up hill and down dale. I couldn't believe my ears. They sounded to be 'avin' a scuffle. There was a sound of blows, and then all went quiet. I took a peep out, and there's the dootor out for the count on the floor. I tried to get him on his feet, because he was breathin' proper, and I thought he'd fainted. His lips was blue like he'd had a heart attack. That's where the missus started to spy on me from over the way. I slapped Beharrell's face a time or two to bring him round, and them's the savage, murderin' blows shc talks about."

Hope flung away his chewed eigar end and lit a cigarette.

"As I'm doin' my best, I hear more footsteps. Now, what would you have done? If I'd been caught, I'd have been booked for a good stretch. Robbery with violence. I laid the doctor down and went baek in my hidey-hole, the wardrobe. Somebody else came in the room by the main door, seemed to stand takin' it all in for a minute, and then went down the secret stairs and up again. Then, I hear the sound of more blows. I daren't come out of the wardrobe. I just 'ad to wait my ehanee. I think it was Mr. Vincent who came back, but I wouldn't swcar. I daren't even peep out. Then all of a sudden, the front door bell rings. Whoever's in the room gets damn busy. I hear 'im gruntin' as though he's carryin' something heavy. He goes to the top of the secret stairs, and I hear 'im grunt again. There's a sound of somethin' heavy fallin' down the steps."

"Wait a minute, Hope. What kind of a sound? A falling body, would you say?"

Hope gave Littlejohn a nasty look for interrupting his dramatic recital, into which he was putting all he'd got.

"No! Like a weight, bump, bumpin' down step after step. Then, of a sudden, me and the old wardrobe starts to revolve back to where we was. Whoever it is goes quietly out, and I hear the bedroom door close. As soon as I'm sure the coast is clear, I'm off. The front door bell rings again, but I don't stop to answer it."

"Wait again. How many times did you ring, Mrs. Hope, and how long did you stay on the doctor's doorstep making up your mind to go for the police?"

She thought a minute.

"Three times. I waited perhaps five minutes wondering what to do."

"That's all, gents. I went out and met my wife comin' away. She accused me of murderin' the doctor. I told 'er what had happened, that I'd found him in what looked like a heart attack and tried to revive him, and that it seemed to me that while I was back in the old wardrobe, he'd come round and went away."

Hope glared at his wife and crushed out his cigarette.

"When news of the murder got out later, she wouldn't believe it wasn't me who did it. Do *you*, Superintendent? That's what I want to know. Do you believe my tale?"

Littlejohn paused. Hope's strained, debauched face came close to his own. He still reeked of stale alcohol.

"Yes, Hope, I believe you. Your story tallies, more or less, with many things I've found out. I don't know who struck the final blow and hid the body behind the secret door whilst you were in the wardrobe. So, I warn you, you must not leave Caldicott until I say you may. You've been talking a lot about packing up and going. That's all off until this case is ended."

"Suits me. I feel a lot better. I've got it off my chest and I've been believed for a change. And now, Mrs. Hope, I'm waitin' for my apology."

His wife made no reply. She rose with a pale, set face, and made for the door.

"We both seem to owe one another apologies, Mr. Hope. But I'll hear yours first. I believe your story about the doc-

tor now. It's up to you to believe mine, too, and say so."

And with that, she left the room and went upstairs.

"Well, if that don't beat the band! Just like a woman. When they're proved in the wrong, they always try to make out it was you did it and they're in the right all the time."

Smiling to himself, Hope went in the bar, returned with a bottle of whisky and glasses, and poured out three stiff drinks.

"Care to join me, gents, just to celebrate my innocence?"

"No, thanks."

St. Hilary's struck two.

## 16

## THE MOONLIT SQUARE

LITTLEJOHN didn't feel like getting up. They had retired to bed, after a long evening full of excitement, at well after two o'clock, and now here was another day, which, in his present lazy mood, seemed almost too full to be borne.

He lay with his eyes closed, listening to the pigeons cooing on the cornices of the Guildhall, and then two or three clocks of the town struck eight and St. Hilary's made up the rear, to be followed five minutes later by the one at the Guildhall.

The curtains were drawn to and he could hear the sounds of Upper Square coming through the open windows. The noise of a broom sweeping the pavements, footsteps passing, a horse and cart, a car or two. There would be no tradesmen about, of course. They entered the houses by the back ways. And there was an old sign at the Sheep Street entrance, *No Hawkers, Street Cries or Musicians*, which, even in these changed days, was respected by all except Madame Alcardi.

At Hampstead, Mrs. Littlejohn would be getting up, opening the windows of the dining-room, taking the dog for a call round the back of the flats. "Are the beds properly aired and is the food good?" she had asked him when he rang her up early last night. He rubbed the sheet between his finger and thumb in a comic effort to find if it was quite dry.

A knock on the door. The maid entered, drew back the curtains, which made him screw up his eyes, and gave him his cup of morning tea.

"What would you like for breakfast this nice morning, sir?"

She was quite a gay one and playfully rebuked him when she saw him stretch out his hand for his pipe.

" You shouldn't smoke before breakfast, sir. And here are your letters."

There were two of them, one re-addressed from Scotland Yard. An advertisement for a book of reference. If he subscribed five guineas for a copy of the next issue, they would put his name among a lot of other famous people, and they enclosed an order form and a list of about a hundred questions from details of his birth and his father and mother to his hobbies and clubs.

The other was official. It gave particulars of the old R.A.F. unit at Mareham-le-Fen when Lydia Horninglow was there. Somebody must have worked hard in the files. A complete schedule of all the officers. Only one name interested the Superintendent. Gilbert Cranage, Flight Lieutenant.

It looked as if Cranage had been a man with a fickle fancy. Grace Beharrell, Lydia Horninglow . . . And a married man all the time. Well, he'd ended like the proverbial pussy . . . in the well.

Littlejohn slid out of bed and opened the windows wide. He slipped on his dressing-gown for the morning air was a bit keen. He took a cold shower to wake him up and then shaved and felt himself again.

It was past nine when he and Cromwell finished breakfast. The sergeant had got up early and been for a three-mile walk across the fen behind the church. Mrs. Hope, looking brighter, met them in the hall as they made their way out.

" The Dofford police have been on the 'phone for you twice already, sir. Will you kindly ring them back?"

Plumtree had worked quickly with the lead pipe from Tommy Drop's workshop and so had the police laboratory.

Early birds!

" How are you this morning, Mrs. Hope?"

" I feel better, Superintendent, and I'm grateful for all you've done for Mr. Hope and me. The air has cleared, even if we haven't yet patched up our personal affairs."

Littlejohn rang through to Dofford. A smart young technician, by the sound of him, answered.

" The hair was Dr. Beharell's, sir. We kept a small

sample from his body when we cut it away to examine the wound. It looks as though you've laid your hands on the lethal weapon."

"Does it? Any prints on the pipe?"

"Yes, sir. Plumtree called early in person with the exhibit and told us how you came by it. We took the prints of Watson from his body in the morgue here and there were several of his own on the pipe. One or two others, too, which we can't identify as yet."

"Thanks. Very prompt work. I congratulate you . . ."

A nervous laugh.

"Only too glad to help, sir."

Cromwell was waiting in the hall, reading for the third time, a letter from his eldest daughter. His sweetheart, as he called her, wrote to him every day when he was away on a case.

"Let's go and take a look at the lower town, Cromwell. I need some tobacco. We haven't even seen the place, yet."

Cromwell had passed through it to and from the football match, but hadn't noticed much of it, coming or going.

They went down Sheep Street. A long row of old property on either side, mainly used as shops. In some cases, the original windows remained, bow-fronted and with old glazing. But, for the most part, hideous modern chromium structures had replaced the antique frontages and there were enough shoe shops and outfitters to cater for a city instead of a small market town.

Littlejohn entered a shop full of the mingled scents of tobacco and sugary confections. He was able to get his favourite tobacco. The shopman greeted him by name.

"Good morning, Mr. Littlejohn. I hear there's been another murder. Good job you're here on the spot."

It was the same everywhere now. People on the pavements turned to stare at him and there was something amiable in their looks and nods. The man from London on whom they were counting. As Macfarlane had said, when it came to the occupants of Upper Square, the average townsfolk couldn't care less. But now, one of themselves had been killed in cold blood. True, it was only poor Tommy Drop, a figure of fun, but he was a part of the

daily ordinary life of Caldicott. In the market square, too, people nodded and greeted him.

"Good morning, Superintendent." "Good morning, Mr. Cromwell." In a frame in the window of the Caldicott office of the *Dofford Daily Advertiser*, the morning edition showed a distorted flashlight photograph of Littlejohn and Cromwell—recognisable only by their shapes and sizes—standing over the body of Tommy Drop. *Superintendent Littlejohn on the Second Upper Square Murder.* And three columns of a story.

An old lady leading a dog passed and spoke to them.

"You'll catch who did it, won't you, sir?"

Two small boys ran beside them to keep pace with them, and a crowd of people overflowing from the auction of a shop, made way for them and gave them cheerful, sympathetic looks.

The two detectives returned to Bank House. It was like going back to another world at least a century older than the town below. You almost expected to see hansom-cabs jingling and clopping about.

Mrs. Trott answered the knocker.

"It's you again, sir. Isn't it awful about Tommy Drop? We're all gettin' scared out of our wits. We never know who'll be the next. Will you come in?"

"It's you I want to speak to again, Mrs. Trott."

She led them into the large drawing-room.

"Did you see much of Watson . . . Tommy Drop, Mrs. Trott?"

"Yes, sir. He was round here once or twice a week. I never liked him. Too light-fingered. He's pick up anything lying loose. He wasn't supposed to bring his donkey and cart in the square, but that didn't seem to matter. All the same, he was mostly round the back where odds and ends lie about and can easily be stolen. Bottles, jars, old iron . . . He'd put them in his cart and go off without so much as a by-your-leave."

"Has he been here lately?"

"Yesterday. He led his cart through the square and to the back. I saw him snooping around the yards seeing what he could find."

"Was he here the day Dr. Beharrell died?"

"I couldn't say, sir. It was my day off."

"Have you had the plumber lately?"

Mrs. Trott's eyes opened wide.

"Yes. We're quite good customers of his. The plumbing's old, you see."

"When did he last call?"

"A week or so ago. We'd a burst pipe in the cellar."

"May we go down and see the repairs?"

She looked more amazed, quite bewildered, in fact, but she asked them to follow her down the stone steps behind the door under the main staircase.

The place sounded quiet. Now and then, a patient climbed the steps of next door and entered the waiting-room. But the house itself was silent.

"Where's Dr. Macfarlane?"

"At a confinement. It's takin' a long time, too. He's been out since seven. They'll have to wait in the surgery today."

They passed the strong-room which remained as it was when they had first seen it, the door forced and bricks broken away in the doorway. In a corner nearby, a thick pipe rose from a long horizontal run to mount through the ceiling.

"There's where the break happened. It was an old pipe and the plumber said he couldn't mend it. He had to put a new piece in. The pipe runs up the back of the inside wall to the tank in the loft."

Littlejohn measured with his eye the length of new piping inserted. It tallied roughly with the piece he had found in Watson's shed.

"Where's the piece he took out?"

"He usually takes the bits and pieces away with him, but he forgot this in his hurry. I was giving him a good telling off for coming half-drunk. It's just round here."

She led the way to the cavity under the secret staircase.

"Have you a match, sir? It's dark just here, as I told you before."

Cromwell struck a light. She looked under the stairs

and recoiled with a sharp hiss and a click of her tongue against her teeth.

"Why, it's gone! And a lot of other things, as well. There was some old gas fittings here and some electric stuff that wasn't used . . ."

"Sounds as if Tommy Drop had been about."

"But how could he get in? The place is locked."

"Are you sure?"

They followed her down a short passage to a door which gave on the back yard. She tried it and it opened.

"Well! I've never done that before. I never come down here much, so I didn't find I'd left it. I remember unlocking it to let in the plumber nearly a fortnight ago when he mended that pipe. As I told you, the plumber had had some drink and got cheeky. I told him what I thought of him as he was packing his things to go, and I saw him off the premises. I must have been so upset that I forgot the door. Then, Tommy Drop hanging about the back, must have found it undone and took all he could lay his hands on in the cellar."

The irony of it! Vincent Pochin, with all his complications of getting in the house, and here was the door, a few yards from the strong-room, unlocked all the time!

They went upstairs again.

"Do you like Dr. Macfarlane, Mrs. Trott?"

She hesitated.

"Yes . . . I do. He's asked me to stay on and I think I will. He needs a bit of understanding. He's a bit moody at times. But we get on all right."

"Did he and Dr. Beharrell hit it off well, too?"

"Yes. He got a bit free with the old doctor and disrespectful now and then, to my way of thinkin', but then I'm old-fashioned. We knew our places in my day. They're not made that way now, are they, sir?"

"What do you mean by 'a bit free,' Mrs. Trott?"

"He'd argue and back-answer a lot and he always seemed to want his own way about things. He'd his own room here, but he'd often go and join Dr. Beharrell, even without bein' asked, as far as I know. The old doctor was a quiet man and liked bein' by himself, but Dr. Macfarlane

used to come and go in the drawing-room as he wished and help himself to smokes and drinks as if they were his own."

"Like a son to the old man?"

"Hardly. Dr. Beharrell wasn't all that fond of him. Sometimes, I think the old doctor got a bit tired of him. I've overheard him say as much to Dr. Macfarlane, but he's not taken much heed and just gone on as before. But that's all dead and done with now, and I shouldn't be talkin' about my new master that way. Two men livin' together on their own is bound to get fed up with one another now and then."

"Has Dr. Macfarlane plenty of money of his own?"

"He's not without. He lives well, better than most. Have you seen his car? It's what's called a *Mercedes*. Not that I'd know one car from another, but I've heard patients talk and say it's cost him a pretty penny. He bought it last year. He's mad on good things. Motor cars, good clothes, hand-made shoes, expensive pipes."

"He must have private means to carry on at that rate."

"He inherited it then. When he first came here thirteen years ago, he was thin and threadbare and didn't seem to have two sixpences to rub together. He even borrowed from me till his salary was due. He'd only one suit and one pair of shoes."

"Has he any relations?"

"Not that I'd know."

"The old doctor must have been fond of him. He left him this practice."

"I must say I'm surprised. Dr. Beharrell wasn't a generous man. What he had, he liked to keep. All the same, he couldn't take his practice with him, could he?"

Littlejohn left Cromwell and Mrs. Trott exchanging pleasantries. She seemed to have taken a fancy to the sergeant. Elderly ladies usually did.

The Superintendent casually strolled into Macfarlane's room. It was just as he had left it the night before. The air was still heavy with tobacco smoke and a cigar had recently been smoked. He looked round, bent and took an

empty two-ounce tobacco tin from the waste-paper basket, and gently placed it in his pocket.

They said goodbye to Mrs. Trott and crossed to the police station. Littlejohn took out the empty tin and handed it to Plumtree.

"You might send that to the lab. at Dofford, Plumtree. Handle it very gently, and keep your fingerprints off it. Tell them to compare any prints they find on it with those on the piece of lead piping you so kindly delivered early this morning."

Plumtree holding the tin as though it were a stick of dynamite, put it carefully in a small box, gingerly parcelled it up, and went into the back room to give instructions.

"Take that to the lab. at Dofford. And it over to Sergeant Ross, and tell 'im to act as I'm now goin' to tell 'im over the telephone. Take the little car and get crackin' and don't 'andle it rough . . . Go on, now."

Lydia Horninglow was passing the window and Littlejohn left Cromwell to entertain Plumtree whilst he went to speak with her.

"Good morning, Miss Horninglow. May I have a brief word with you? May I suggest a cup of coffee together at my hotel?"

She looked taken aback and hesitated. Her face was grim, as usual. Then she broke into a smile and looked resigned.

"This is an unusual honour, Superintendent. It's very kind of you, although I don't understand what it's all about."

They found a quiet place in one corner of Mrs. Hope's small tea-room, which held a large palm in the centre surrounded by coloured cane chairs and tables, nostalgic reminders of certain French hotels.

"There are one or two matters on which you can help me very much in this enquiry and I hope you won't mind if they prove to be very personal. You can trust me to be discreet about them and refuse to answer if you find it embarrassing."

She gave him a solemn fixed look, wondering what was coming.

" You were once engaged to Mr. Vincent Pochin?"

She blushed, and then she pulled herself together and looked Littlejohn in the eyes.

" Yes. All that is, of course, almost forgotten. It was a long time ago."

" He broke the engagement?"

" Yes."

" Were you sorry or relieved?"

" Very relieved."

She said it with emphasis.

" May I ask why?"

She nervously cleared her throat. The waitress came for their order and went.

" In the first place, Mr. Pochin was years older than I was. It could hardly be called a love match. We were both lonely people, thrown in each other's social paths, rather similar in tastes, convinced at first that we might get on well together. Mr. Pochin was a man of means. I'll be quite candid about it. We, on our side, were very poor. The living isn't a very good one nowadays, and mother and daddy had a very thin time during the war and just after. I thought if I married, I could help them."

" Very true. And then . . ."

" I was accepted in the Pochin family. Vincent's mother was very kind to me, although the idea of his marrying didn't fill her with much enthusiasm. Sam and Irene, his brother and sister, were quite pleased."

" You found out a lot about the Pochin family? Their eccentricities, for example."

" That was why I was relieved when the marriage was abandoned."

" The family history isn't a good one, is it? There is a hint of instability about them?"

" That is putting it rather mildly. I shouldn't be talking like this, but if, as you say, it will help you and be treated in the strictest confidence . . ."

" I assure you of that, Miss Horninglow. Tell me, what in particular struck you about the family, their relationships with each other?"

" I found when I got in their circle, that the old lady,

their mother, was a very fine character. She still treated her family like children and she didn't really want the men to marry . . . No . . . It's not as you think. She doesn't strike one as the possessive clinging mother type. In my opinion, she wanted no repetition of her own tragedy. Her husband committed suicide and there was a brother, William, who was quietly 'put away.' She didn't want any more children in the family. As though she feared the taint."

"What did you think of Sam?"

"He was the elder brother and seemed to keep Vincent under his wing. Rather a proud, dogmatic man, who says little, but likes his own way. When Vincent broke our engagement, Sam called to see me and tried to excuse him. Sam had a big influence on Vincent and appeared to regard him as younger and more helpless and in need of protection. It was a nice feeling, but silly and overdone. What does a man of Vincent's age need with a bodyguard of that kind? I was glad to be free. Better a return to poverty-stricken existence than that. I realised the responsibility and even horror of a married life in which one partner needed the perpetual watchfulness and excuses of the other for his lack of character and childish immaturity."

There was another pause as the waitress brought the coffee and spread out the cups and plates. Lydia Horninglow gave Littlejohn a queer questioning nervous look, as though she understood there were more and harder answers to give. Littlejohn took the plunge.

"Forgive me if I mention even more unhappy matters from the past, Miss Horninglow, but were you, at one time, associated with Flight-Lieutenant Cranage, at Marcham-le-Fen?"

A spasm of pain crossed her face, which filled Littlejohn with sadness and compassion. Why be for ever fated to place his finger on the raw wounds of unhappy people? He poured out the drinks, pretending not to have noticed her distress.

"Yes. Who told you his name? I thought it was all forgotten. Few people here knew of it."

The hardness had vanished from her look and, with

her cheeks flushed with emotion, she was quite attractive. Yes, attractive . . .

"That is quite all right. But I'm sorry I must revive it all. I have merely consulted the old files from Mareham. I've not questioned anyone else about it. You have not forgotten, I see. You loved him."

He said it very gently without making it a question. She bit her lip and nodded. She was quite different now from the bitter woman who wandered regularly, grim and forlorn, from the church to the town, and back. Her aggressive, intense manner had given way at the very mention of Cranage's name, which perhaps nobody else had uttered for many years.

"He was said to be irresponsible and fond of every woman he met by those who didn't know him properly. His wife left him because she was jealous. And yet, he was nicer to me and sweeter than any man I have ever met. It was the strange times we were living in, I suppose. Not knowing what a day would bring, that made him as he was, a bit irresponsible and almost desperate to live to the full. He promised to marry me as soon as his wife would divorce him. He didn't love Grace Beharrell. He told me so. She threw herself at him. She was a pretty girl, with a fixed sweet smile, as hard as nails, and cruel to men and animals. He would have come back to me . . ."

A gentle touch, a sympathetic word, and Lydia Horninglow was ready to stammer out a full apologia for herself and Cranage. Littlejohn felt a spasm of bitterness himself at the harsh blows life rains on the innocent. For she did seem innocent somehow, sitting primly there in her little straw hat, crumbling a biscuit and with a tender look in her eyes as she conjured up the virtues of the man Upper Square unanimously called a cad. During the years since he had betrayed her, Lydia Horninglow had slowly built up a fantastic novelettish romance around Cranage to comfort her loneliness.

"You were always trying to find out what happened to him. Calling at Bank House and enquiring about what went on there from Mrs. Trott?"

She looked up at him and smiled forlornly.

"I wasn't much of a detective, was I? You must be laughing at me. You see, I knew Gilbert was seeing Grace Beharrell. He told me it was the doctor giving hospitality, but I guessed and feared the truth. If a woman takes a man who has left another woman for her, she must not be surprised if he repeats the process again and betrays her too, in time. But Gilbert was true to me in his heart, I know. I was the only woman who ever gave him a child . . . And that must have counted for something. My father says he told you all about it. I'm not ashamed."

"Did you guess what happened the night he vanished?"

She looked across the street at Bank House as though living through it all again.

"That night, I followed him here. She had telephoned him at Mareham and he left in a hurry. I begged a lift from another officer who was coming to Caldicott. I pretended my father was ill. I found Gilbert waiting in the garden there in front of the memorial. I hid myself in the doorway of the Guildhall. Grace came out and met him there. It was moonlight and I could see it all."

Another look of painful remembrance, as though she saw again their furtive embraces and joy at being together.

"I crept up and listened. I had no shame or pride at all. All I heard was them planning to meet again at nine o'clock. People kept coming out of the surgery, and I guessed the doctor was busy and they were taking advantage of his absence. Then she went inside."

Littlejohn could see it all, just as if he were looking through his bedroom window on the first floor of the hotel.

The waitress came and gathered up the cups and took them away. Outside, the magistrates from the petty sessions were standing in front of the Guildhall and one of them was pointing across to where the murdered rag-and-bone man had been found the night before. He made some comment and they all began to laugh.

"Gilbert sat on one of the seats smoking. I stood there behind the nearest tree. Had he strolled as far as he finally threw the end of his cigarette, he would have found me spying on him. I wanted to go and plead with him, but I didn't. Then the front door of Bank House opened and

the doctor came out carrying his bag as though off on a case. He vanished down Sheep Street. As soon as he'd disappeared, Grace appeared again, crossed to where Gilbert was sitting, and they spoke a few words and both went indoors. The doctor had been urgently called to a case on the other side of town and would be away about an hour . . . I heard her tell Gilbert. I was as near to them as that."

Littlejohn could follow it all, working up to a climax, like an old melodrama. He could even have taken up the tale.

"As soon as they got indoors, the doctor returned. He must have been hiding round the corner. The lights were on in the drawing-room. I could see a thin streak through the blackout curtains, and I wondered if Gilbert was a liar after all and had told me the same lying tale he'd told to all the women before me. The doctor came quietly back to Bank House, but, instead of entering by the front door, he unlocked the one in the basement and went that way. His movements were exaggeratedly furtive and I wanted to cry out or run and warn Gilbert. There was a sense of disaster in it all. There was nothing I felt I could do. Suppose, after all, I'd given the alarm and the doctor had merely come back for something . . . medicine, instruments from the cellar?"

She looked cold and forlorn again.

"Nobody came out again that night. Neither the doctor, nor Gilbert, nor Grace. I waited till dawn. Gilbert didn't come out. Then, I went away. I thought perhaps when the doctor came in, Gilbert had crept away quietly by the back. When he didn't turn up at Mareham next day, I telephoned my father on some pretext or other. He told me that Gilbert and Grace had eloped in the night and that the whole square was agog and Dr. Beharrell distracted. I fainted and was very ill for a long time."

She looked about her for her coffee cup and found it had gone. She lowered her hand in a pathetic gesture.

"I will never believe Gilbert did that. But I had to have proof if he had been caught by the doctor and killed, or people would think me mad. The child came, there was all the worry and sorrow . . . My brother and my mother died,

But I could not rest because I didn't know what had become of Gilbert. I tried to find out by questioning Beharrell's servants and anyone who might have been about the square that night. I was ridiculed. They said I was setting my cap at the doctor because his wife had gone. Other people thought I was mad . . . an embittered spinster."

She raised her large and agonised eyes to Littlejohn.

"I believe Dr. Beharrell killed them both out of jealousy that night. But I could never find out the real truth. Where were their bodies? Nobody found them. If I could only know the truth now, I would be happy. If the doetor killed them, they didn't elope, and I'm sure Gilbert would have come out of the house and back to me."

She wanted Cranage to be dead, murdered by a jealous husband, instead of alive and well and living with the woman with whom he's betrayed her! Well, well. Beautiful, tragic irony of life.

Littlejohn took her gloved hands in his own.

"I'm sorry, Miss Horninglow, but I believe what you think is true. Cranage was murdered along with Mrs. Beharrell by the doetor on the night you waited for him. And now, Nemesis has caught up with Beharrell and he, too, has paid the priece of his crime."

"Where is his body?"

"I don't know, Miss Horninglow. But does it matter, now?"

"No . . . Perhaps it doesn't. I think I'll go. Please excuse me."

She rose and extended her hand with a tired smile.

She turned and walked out of the room with her head high, the old grim look softened by one of fortitude. Littlejohn never knew whether she was glad Cranage had died because of his betrayal of her, or because she somehow fancied that had he lived, he would have returned to her and his child, and had only been prevented by Beharrell's crime.

The waitress entered and found Littlejohn quietly smoking.

"Telephone, sir."

"The tin you sent, sir. There were prints on it which tally with some we found on the lead pipe."

The voice of the smart officer at Dofford again and then an expectant pause as he waited for Littlejohn to grunt with satisfaction and perhaps denounce the murderer.

Instead . . . "Thank you very much. Goodbye."

The Superintendent left the telephone box, returned for his pipe in the coffee room, and looked absently through the window. Cromwell was approaching after another visit to Gibbet, the barber. Littlejohn had forgotten that in the course of their walk in the town, he'd asked the sergeant to make a call on him again.

"Yes, sir. Gibbet says he was having a cup of tea in his room at the back at five o'clock last Friday. He saw Tommy Drop snooping round the backs of the houses and felt happy that he himself had nothing movable about. He didn't see what went on, as somebody came in the shop and he had to leave the workroom. I thought we'd get something from Gibbet. He misses nothing that goes on. I expect he saw Tommy Drop enter the square and went behind to see he didn't get in mischief on Gibbet's premises or property."

Through the window Littlejohn saw something which stirred his imagination.

Gibbet at the door sweeping out his shop. Madame Alcardi welcoming a pupil. Mrs. Trott cleaning the late doctor's brass plate. Macfarlane passing in his Mercedes. The Hopes moving one of the shrubs in a tub from the front of the hotel. Gralam standing at his door admiring a good-looking woman who was passing his shop . . . a modern china shepherdess. Sam Pochin just leaving his office. Everybody except Vincent Pochin, who might, at any moment, rise from his hospital bed and walk on the stage, too. All the characters of the drama, parading, as they normally did, in the square before the audience on the benches in front of the tin soldier. Parading in front of the curtain after the end of the melodrama.

But the end was not yet!

## 17

## THE SHOT IN THE DARK

LUNCH came and went and still Littlejohn didn't seem inclined to move. He sat a long time smoking over coffee and then he wrote a long letter to his wife. Cromwell was used to this sort of thing and kept his chief company, wrote home, too, puffed his own pipe, a replica of Littlejohn's own, and maintained a sympathetic silence. He knew that the Superintendent had mentally spread the pieces of the Upper Square jigsaw before him and was sorting them out in his mind.

In the bar, George Hope was talking to some reporters from London, whom the second murder had quickly brought down like bees round a honey-pot. The newshawks were drinking beer, telling one another stories, and quizzing George Hope, who was drinking harder than anyone.

"My wife's packing her bags and going back to her uncle's," the landlord had confided to Cromwell earlier in the day. "She says she's got to think things out. Isn't that just like a woman? She's the guilty party, but she puts me in the wrong. And after I've explained everythin' and apologised. If she leaves this place she'd better not come back . . . I've told her . . ."

Finally, the Mayor of Caldicott turned up.

"It's high time you and I had a serious exchange of views, Superintendent. One murder's bad enough. Now it's two. The town's in a turmoil wondering who'll be the next . . . Have you seen this?"

He held one of the popular London dailies in his hand and spread it out like a banner.

## CALDICOTT KILLER STRIKES AGAIN!

And two columns and some more pictures of the mid-  
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night gathering round the corpse of Tommy Drop. They'd even got a picture of him and his donkey. As usual, the creature was braying.

The Mayor was quite polite about it all, but frosty. He was somebody in the town. A man of money, which he'd inherited, and a surgeon into the bargain. He had once been head of the Caldicott Hospital and done most of the operations, although he'd run a general practice, as well. Then on the appointed day, when the hospital had been nationalised, a very competent consultant had taken his place and it had been hinted that general practice might suit Mr. Percival better. He had therupon retired and entered politics. He was somewhat of a thorn in the flesh of the hospital management committee . . .

"I don't like to interfere, Superintendent, and no doubt you have your own methods of doing things, but I must have your reassurance that all is going well with the case. It's my duty to the citizens of the town."

Cromwell knew from the way Littlejohn smoked his pipe that the Superintendent was amused. It sagged in the corner of his mouth and, instead of puffing it, he gently blew wisps of smoke through the bowl.

"What did you want to know, Mister Mayor?"

The mayor started to perspire and shuffled his great weight from one foot to the other. He didn't quite know himself.

"Watson . . . Why was he killed? Surely not a homicidal maniac?"

"No, sir. Just someone eliminating a blackmailer."

"Ohhhh . . ."

Mr. Percival looked wise. Blackmail, eh? Now for some scandal!

"But who . . . what?"

"I can't say yet."

The mayor looked round as though seeking somebody to whom to express his disgust. Instead, he met the slightly mocking eyes of Cromwell, whom he'd disliked from the start.

"And is that *all* . . ."

"I hope to clear it all up very soon. In fact, my colleague

and I may be on our way back to London tomorrow."

"At least, I hope you'll have the murderer by then."

"We'll try."

The Mayor looked deflated. He'd just come from a meeting of the councillors at which the crime had been discussed, and he'd told them he was going to get to the bottom of things, once and for all. Now he'd have to make up a tale on the way back. The Superintendent had told him, in confidence . . . Yes, in confidence. He squared his shoulders.

"Well, see you make an arrest quickly, Littlejohn. We don't want a killer at large any longer than is necessary."

The waitress was in the room again, fussing, and indicating in pantomime that Littlejohn was wanted on the telephone.

"Excuse me, Mr. Mayor."

The Mayor ignored Cromwell's presence whilst he waited. The sergeant didn't mind. He started to read again the latest bulletin from his little sweetheart at home.

Littlejohn was back.

"You were saying, Mr. Mayor . . .?"

"I hope you'll make an arrest soon."

"You want an arrest?"

The Mayor bridled, but instead of laughter, he met the bland grey eyes of the Superintendent.

"We're just off to make one now. Mr. Vincent Pochin."

"What! Surely he didn't murder Beharrell?"

"I didn't say so. He's tried to commit suicide twice in the last twenty-four hours. The message was to tell me that he's just attempted to throw himself from a third storey window of the local hospital. Luckily, the sister came in time to prevent him."

Of course! It wasn't to be expected that Vincent would try again without someone there to prevent him!

The Mayor was furious.

"It's disgraceful, the discipline at that hospital! When I was in charge, they wouldn't have been allowed to leave patients long enough, or get them in the depressed condition which leads to such attempts. I shall take up the matter right away. A full enquiry . . ."

He flung his fat arms about.

"You'll excuse us, sir. We've to go to the hospital right away."

"And I hope you'll make somebody sit up for this. Disgraceful! In my time . . ."

They left him raising the roof in his anger.

"She's just booked a seat on the night plane to Nice tomorrow . . ." said Hope as they left the hotel. He seemed intent on supplying them with up-to-date bulletins of *his* case, even if nobody seemed to know much about *theirs*.

"Why don't you do the same?" threw out Cromwell as he closed the door.

Vincent Pochin was sitting up in bed when they arrived in the ward. His hair was dishevelled and his eyes wide and wild, but he was drinking a cup of tea and eating yellow slab cake, all the same. Sam was sitting at the bedside.

"He's tried to do away with himself again. I've just been begging of him to consider other people."

"I can't stand it. Mother isn't well and somebody, it seems, has told her I'm a suspect in this case. Although, as Sam says, I couldn't have killed Watson, because I was here all the time, and if you find out who murdered Watson, you might find who killed Beharrell."

"It's not quite as easy as that, sir. Watson was killed some hours before they found him. You were at large at that time. But don't worry . . . We'll soon find out who did it, and then the clouds will lift for you and all will be well."

"He's not himself. I'm going to take him away to Switzerland as soon as he's fit to travel, Superintendent. He'll forget all this in the clean air and mountains. Won't he?"

But Vincent wasn't listening.

"Sam was just telling me . . ."

"Never mind that, now. You must rest, Vincent."

Sam, in his role as his brother's keeper, took away his cup and his piece of half-eaten cake, and put them on the bedside table.

"I haven't finished my cake, yet, Sam. I want it."

Cromwell blew through his closed lips.

Littlejohn was having no more of it.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Vincent, but I'll have to ask you to come with us now. I spoke to the resident M.O. and the matron on my way in. They say you're fit to get up and go out again."

Which was true. The matron was eager to get rid of Vincent before he did anything worse! Already Mr. Percival had been on the telephone making hoarse threats and complaining about the discipline in the wards.

"But, you can't. I'm not fit."

"Come along, sir. No more fuss."

"But where are you taking me?"

"I'm arresting you, sir."

"On what charge?"

"Twice attempting suicide."

"But you can't."

"As a lawyer, Mr. Vincent, you ought to know better than that. Please come along."

Sam Pochin had been silently watching and thinking, and his face expressed relief.

"Yes, Vincent. Come along, that's a good fellow. I see what the Superintendent means. It's protective arrest. That's all. You'll be confined until all this is over. Just a day or so. Then, when the murderer has been caught, you'll be released."

"But the disgrace of being in prison?"

"We'll let it be known, sir, that you've been detained for your own safety. The public will think we suspect the murderer of being after you."

Vincent jumped at it.

"Is that right, Sam?"

"Yes."

No mention of bail or the legal niceties. Sam seemed glad to be relieved of the responsibility for his unruly brother.

"You'll not let it be thought that I'm arrested on suspicion of killing Bcharrell?"

"Of course not."

Vincent Pochin went with them to the lock-up like a lamb. The cell they found him in Caldicott police station

was quite comfortable and on Littlejohn's instructions, the bewildered Plumtree added a cosy armchair, borrowed from the Guildhall, and a decent mattress and bedding from Pochin's flat.

"It's as comfortable as the hospital, at least, but I wish it was over," said Pochin, with a book to read and the assurance of an early release.

"Don't forget to tell the reporters that I'm under protective arrest."

They left him eating a steak and chips from the *Red Lion*, for his evening meal.

Cromwell was as bad as Plumtree in his amazement. This latest move of Littlejohn's and the complacence of the Pochin brothers in the face of it. He wondered what Brodrribb would have said . . .

Littlejohn explained everything over dinner. The long day of doing little was to end in a solution that night.

Outside, dusk had fallen and the gas lamps shone through the trees of Upper Square. It had grown sultry again, as though another storm was in the offing. The blackbird had finished his evening song and gone to roost, and the usual idlers around the memorial had gone home to roost as well. Lights went on in the rooms of the tall grey houses, and from the open window of one of the caretaker's quarters among the rooftops came the sound of sombre West Indian music over the radio and a passionate singer tearing his heart out. His voice mixed with the primitive wailing of erotic cats in the gardens behind the square.

The whole of the police force seemed to be mustered. First one and then another of them passed the window of the hotel dining room from which the lights shone out, making those inside look to passers-by like lonely fish in an aquarium. At one time, Littlejohn could see three bobbies in different parts of the square. The Mayor had been bullying Plumtree for more police patrols, because another murder would just put the tin hat on things and cause general panic. Plumtree had consulted Littlejohn. It suited the Superintendent's purpose to keep the Mayor quiet. "Do it quietly, then," he told Plumtree. This was the result.

You couldn't hear the police, but you could see them well enough! They had orders to detain anybody suspicious; whoever it might be.

Plumtree silently reviewed his troops, parading here and there from the police station to the church and back. Protecting the square, that was it. He felt his responsibilities keenly. He looked round. The surgery at Dr. Beharrell's old place was over, and the last patient left the rooms next door to Bank House and shuffled away, coughing. Lights went on in Beharrell's old drawing-room and Plumtree saw Macfarlane drawing the curtains with a cigar in his mouth. It hadn't taken him long to enter into possession.

The door of the church opened and closed quietly. Plumtree saw someone emerge and stand in the shadows looking out into the square. He approached to find out who it was. The figure stood still until the sergeant was within a yard of him. Then, as Plumtree took another step to make out his face, there was a shot and Plumtree fell in the porch within a few feet of where they'd found the body of Tommy Drop.

Littlejohn, standing in the hall of the *Red Lion*, heard the commotion and rushed outside. Police whistles were being blown all over the place. He caught the arm of a bobby running past.

"What's happened?"

"Another murder . . . Somebody's been shot at the church again."

Littlejohn ran behind the constable to the little group which had gathered round the church door. Every minute saw somebody else joining in. Police, caretakers, civilians who materialised from nowhere. To Littlejohn the night seemed pitch black at first after the lights of the hotel. Then he gradually made out the details of the scene. The sacristan of the church was doing most of the talking.

"I was settin' out the chairs for a service tomorrow. There wasn't much light. Suddenly, I hears somebody come in by the north door and make for the west one. People does that sometimes. It's a short cut. I didn't bother. Next thing, I heard is a shot. I runs to the west door, but before I can make out who's there, I gets his fist full in

me face . . . And when I picks myself up, there's poor old Plumtree lying in 'is own blood in the porch and the one who's done it gone back through the church an' off."

He was still mopping his mouth and nose with his handkerchief.

They had carried Plumtree in the church and laid him on a carpet on the floor. He was groaning and his eyes wore a pathetic questioning look, like patients who think they're going to be given their death warrant, cast at the doctor.

Two policemen stood beside him. They'd cleared everyone else out. Lydia Horninglow was kneeling at Plumtree's feet. She had already slit one of the sergeant's trouser-legs and revealed the wound. A hole in the side of the calf, a bullet hole from which a little blood was oozing. Plumtree's long woollen pants and the top of his sock were soaked.

She looked up at Littlejohn.

"I was a nursing orderly in the W.R.A.F. I've just washed the wound in disinfectant and we've sent for the doctor."

She looked very efficient and it was a good job she'd been handy. In next to no time, she'd got to work. A bowl of hot water, cotton wool, surgical scissors, all spread around. And Plumtree groaning gently.

"I never saw who it was and I never said a thing to him. He just shot at me."

He sounded pained that one of those he was supposed to protect should have done such a dirty trick.

Macfarlane arrived without hat and coat. He was panting from running. Cromwell followed him in. He took in the scene at a glance, and dropped on his knees beside Lydia Horninglow. Satisfied with what she had done, he took a bandage from his bag, put a pad of lint over the wound and bound it up. The ambulance had arrived, and they put Plumtree on a stretcher and took him away.

"Let my wife know it's all right, won't you?" he said as they slid him in the vehicle. Half a dozen people promised.

Macfarlane picked up his bag and prepared to leave for home and telephone the hospital with particulars and instructions.

"How many more?" he said peevishly to Littlejohn as he left the church.

"I was just settin' out the chairs for the service tomorrow . . ." The caretaker, still dabbing his nose, was telling his tale to a reporter this time. Flash lamps exploded as the photographers took more pictures of Littlejohn and the scene of the crime.

"I can't stop my nose bleedin'. The docto might 'ave give it the once-over. If it had been old Dr. Beharrell he'd have noticed it."

Somebody took a photograph of the caretaker with blood streaming across his mouth and lips.

"It'll look more realistic."

Littlejohn took Cromwell by the arm.

"Round them up, old chap, as arranged. Start with Sam Pochin. He's probably in the flat keeping near his brother. Then the rest. Get them to the police station as quickly as you can. Use one or two of the constables to help. They won't be needed as protectors again tonight. The murderer's limit seems to be one a day . . ."

Cromwell was a bit surprised. Poor old Plumtree off to hospital and the chief as good humoured as could be!

A large figure loomed out of the dark.

"Is the Superintendent about?"

It was the Mayor. He moved over to Littlejohn.

"What did I tell you, Superintendent? Now the killer's turned loose on the police. Things are going from bad to worse."

"We're doing all we can, Mr. Mayor."

"Plumtree might have been killed."

"Fortunately he's more frightened than hurt."

"I must say I don't like the callous way . . ."

"I'm busy, Mr. Mayor. Goodnight."

Littlejohn vanished in the dark and the Mayor pulled himself together, and groped for the nearest telephone and asked for the Chief Constable at Dofford.

# 18

## THE SWEAT OF FEAR

WHEN Littlejohn arrived at the police station there was nobody there except a policeman he'd never met before and whom he caught smoking a cigarette and reading a comic paper. The constable sprang to his feet, dropped his diversions, and saluted.

"Pity about Sergeant Plumtree, sir."

"Yes, it is. You seem to be missing his disciplinary eye here already. How is Mr. Vincent Pochin?"

"Quite comfortable, sir. He's reading a book and smoking cigarettes one after another."

"Bring him in, will you, please?"

When Pochin entered it was obvious the bobby's remarks were an over-statement. He looked awful. Littlejohn couldn't help remembering the first time they'd met him in the train on the night of their arrival. The highly polished shoes, the immaculate grooming, the gloves, the jaunty green hat with a feather in the band. Now, unshaven, with rings under his eyes, a soiled collar and clothes looking as if he'd slept in them, he was a perfect wreck.

"Good evening, Mr. Pochin. Are they looking after you properly?"

"Very good of you to enquire, Superintendent. In fact, I'm most terribly grateful for all your trouble about me. The officer here has just told me there's been another murder in the square. Poor Plumtree this time. It might have been me. I'm sure it would have been if you'd not put me in protective custody."

His distress was pitiful.

"It was hardly murder, sir. Just a bullet wound in the fleshy part of the calf. He'll soon be all right again. But it might have been much worse."

"Have they got the man who did it? I'm sure he's after

me. I can't stand much more of this. And, of course, I can't spend the rest of my life in prison, can I, keeping out of his way? He might even break in here one day and shoot me, too."

Vincent was working up to another brainstorm and looked wild enough to try committing suicide again.

"Control yourself, sir. It will be all over before morning. Then you'll be free to move about in safety again. Why are you so afraid? Has someone threatened you personally?"

"Not exactly. But my brother, Sam, said I'd have to take care of myself until the police had captured the murderer. You see, he might think I was in the house at the time Beharrell was killed, and that I might be able to identify him and testify against him."

"I see. Yes. There's quite a lot in that. Anyhow, you're safe here."

The telephone rang. It was the hobby Cromwell had sent to bring Macfarlane across to the police station.

"He says he's some calls to make and he can't come."

"Tell him he'll either come at once under his own steam, or you'll arrest him and bring him over . . . Tell him whilst I'm on the line."

A pause.

"Hello, sir. He says he's coming. But it's under protest."

"I don't care what it's under. Tell him to be here right away."

The party was beginning. The little room, so short of something without Plumtree's massive form in it, would be just about large enough to hold them all. Outside, a car pulled-up.

It was the Chief Constable from Dofford.

"Your assistant rang me up to say Plumtree's been shot. What's been happening here? It looks as if . . ."

There was no time to answer before Lydia Horninglow arrived, accompanied by the constable who'd been to bring her. He looked as if he'd arrested her. He had a stiff official air and he kept a close eye on her as though she might bolt at any minute. The Chief Constable bowed to her.

"Hullo, Miss Horninglow. What are you doing here?"

He turned to Littlejohn for an explanation and then his eye fell on Vincent Pochin, sitting in one corner, smoking another cigarette in a holder, looking now like a battered toff.

"Will you please explain what all this is about, Littlejohn? As I was coming out, the Mayor rang up complaining that you'd been most impolite to him."

"I'll apologise later then, sir. Meanwhile would you care to sit down? I'll explain everything when the rest have arrived."

"The rest? You seem to be arresting the whole damn town."

More feet in the lobby. Hope's voice raised in complaint, as usual.

"As if I hadn't enough to do just now with my own troubles. You'd better get it over quickly. I've a lot to do and there's customers to attend to. We're both going on our holidays to Nice tomorrow."

Littlejohn interrupted the argument.

"Bring them in, please, and find some more chairs, will you?"

The Chief Constable had taken a seat in Plumtree's chair just to show he was in charge. Nobody argued about it.

Mrs. Hope entered first, dressed up to the nines, powdered, scented, wearing her best costume and jewels. It gave the Chief Constable quite a turn. He straightened his tie and twisted his small moustache.

Hope followed looking like nothing on earth. He was completely punctured when he saw the distinguished gathering to which he'd been invited. Then Macfarlane arrived with his escort.

The doctor looked annoyed, to say the least of it. He'd hoped to take on the mantle of Beharrell at once. Everybody had respected and made way for the old doctor, even kowtowed to him. This was a poor start for Macfarlane, whom the constable had addressed as "Doctor Mac," an abbreviation he detested, and had insisted on bringing him here like a common crook.

"I've patients to see, Superintendent. I shall hold you responsible."

"We won't keep you very long."

Finally, Cromwell and Sam Pochin. Sam looked fresh and spruce, very different from his brother, who was usually the smartest of the pair of them. He started to apologise.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Littlejohn. Good evening, Chief Constable . . . And you, too, Lydia."

Then his eye fell on Vincent. He hurried over to him.

"What are you doing here, Vincent? Are you all right, old chap?"

Sam's presence, the fact that here was someone on whom to load all his troubles again, made Vincent querulous. He whined in his reedy voice.

"I'm all right, Sam. They've been very good to me, but it's a strain and I'm glad to see you. You know there's been another crime. I'm sure it's me they're after."

Sam patted his shoulder.

"Bear up, old fellow. It'll soon be over."

Littlejohn had been talking softly with Cromwell. He gave an order to the sergeant, who nodded and left the room immediately. They heard his footsteps grow fainter and fainter in the silence outside.

Littlejohn sat at the desk opposite the Chief Constable.

"Shut the door, please, constable. Will you all please sit down?"

It was like a seance, with everybody expecting something startling to turn up. They all looked at each other questioningly.

"We'd better make a start, as I don't wish to detain you long. If you don't mind, ladies, we'll smoke."

Littlejohn lit his pipe and Macfarlane, to show he wasn't in the least put-out, cut and lit a cigar, probably one of Beharrell's. Vincent Pochin, who'd smoked four cigarettes since they brought him in, took out another and fitted it in his holder.

"Last Friday, Dr. Beharrell was murdered. The scene was partly overlooked by the vicar as he stood on the scaffolding round the clock tower, and he thought he knew who committed the crime."

Everybody sat up. This was a startling beginning, at any

rate. The guilty man among them must have begun to sweat.

"Do you mean to say that whoever murdered Beharrell is in this room at present?"

The Chief Constable's eyes nearly left their sockets.

"Yes, sir. That's why we're all here."

The atmosphere changed at once. It was no longer a friendly little party, but a grim ordeal.

"The vicar didn't see everything, though. He merely saw Mr. Vincent Pochin defend himself against an attack by the doctor."

"Very nice of you to put it that way, Superintendent."

Vincent looked quite pleased with himself, and Sam nodded approval.

"To understand the full story, we must go back many years, to when Grace Beharrell, the doctor's wife, was supposed to have run away with Gilbert Cranage. The doctor returned unexpectedly that night, however. He'd been suspicious for a long time. He caught them in the house, presumably in a compromising situation, and killed them both."

Lydia Horninglow turned pale and tense, expecting Littlejohn to ask her to bear this out from her experience of the fatal night, but, as nobody challenged the statement, he went on.

"Beharrell had to get rid of the dead bodies. He threw Cranage down the well in the garden, but he'd some scruples about doing the same with his wife. He'd probably killed her in a rage and, after all, he'd loved her once. The idea of disposing of her and her lover in the same way perhaps repelled him. There was a disused strong-room, a relic of the old bank which once occupied his premises. He was the only one who held a key. He put his wife's body there, and there it remained until last week. Beharrell must still have loved his wife and developed a form of madness or fear, which prevented his disturbing her remains, even when it was folly to leave them there."

Macfarlane looked up with a sneer on his lips.

"You're wrong, you know, Superintendent. I told you."

"Please let me go on, doctor. You'll be given your

chance later. When the news got out, some people didn't believe the talk of the runaway love affair. Where could the pair have gone? Cranage, now a deserter, was sought after by the R.A.F., and the doctor was supposed to have pursued extensive enquiries about his wife. They'd been seen going in Bank House; they were never seen coming out. The police, however, on the strength of statements by Beharrell, fully believed the story of the elopement and the case ended in the official belief that the unhappy couple had fled to London and met their deaths in the bombing, which, at the time, was at its height."

The Chief Constable was checking every statement and writing busily on Plumtree's scribbling-pad.

"Who told you about their going in the house and never coming out?"

"Miss Horninglow can testify later. It's quite true, though."

Lydia merely nodded.

"Among those who didn't believe the elopement story, was Mr. Vincent Pochin. He'd been in love with Grace Brodrribb before she married Beharrell, remained her good friend, and wasn't satisfied. For years, he tried to find the truth. In devious ways, he attempted to break in the strong-room, which, by a process of deduction and his knowledge of the old house, he suspected had been used as a hiding place for one or both dead bodies."

"That's right."

Vincent suddenly gave tongue, but the Chief Constable wasn't satisfied.

"Why didn't Pochin tell the police, then? That was the obvious thing to do."

Again the reedy voice interrupted.

"I'd to have positive proof first. The case had been investigated once and dropped. If I'd told the police of my suspicions, they'd probably have re-opened the case, but what would have happened if I'd been wrong? I was supposed to be a friend of Beharrell. What would he have thought of me? He might even have sued me for slander. In any case, until I knew the truth, I wasn't going to arouse his suspicions."

They had to let it rest at that. Vincent Pochin was a man with his own peculiar ways of looking at and doing things. Littlejohn continued.

"Beharrell eventually discovered that someone was unduly inquisitive about the contents of the strong-room. The house was broken into and the conscience-stricken doctor could only think of one reason for it. So, he started to keep house and never left the place long enough to allow the vault to be forced open. And there was the well, too . . . Beharrell, as soon as he could after he'd disposed of Cranage's body in it, had it filled in. When the water-board insisted on re-opening it, he moved heaven and earth to prevent it."

"You're barking up the wrong tree, I tell you. I know all about the skeleton," shouted Macfarlane, unable to control himself any longer.

Littlejohn brushed him aside again.

"Your time will come, doctor. Fortunately, the foreman of the excavating party from the water board was a patient of Beharrell's, and a very grateful one, too. He settled the difference between the doctor and the water board by doing Beharrell a favour. The doctor told him, in desperation, that he'd once thrown a skeleton down the well, an anatomical model he'd used in medical school. He'd be grateful if, when the foreman found it, he'd let him have it back, as it might easily prove an embarrassment. The foreman, suspecting nothing, found and quietly handed over to the doctor the bones of a large man. And, mark this, they were all separated, not wired together, as students' models are, as a rule . . . And now, Dr. Macfarlane . . . You told me you personally had arranged, at Beharrell's request, for this awkward relic of student days to be thrown down the well. I can't understand how Beharrell brought himself to part with it. He was a hoarder. What he had, he kept, in almost a psychopathic way. He even couldn't part with a rocking-horse he'd had when a child. He kept it in the attic. Why did he want to throw down the well a skeleton he could have sold, or, true to his usual fad, kept as a memento of his days at medical school."

"I don't know. All I know is, he asked me to dispose

of it and said it was one he'd used at the university."

"I'd advise you to think again, doctor. I've something else to say to you later. Meanwhile, I shall assume that the bones of Cranage were unearthed from the well and disposed of elsewhere, we don't know where, by Beharrell."

"Think what you like. I stick to my statement."

"We shall see. Then the doctor's mother died. He went to Peterborough several times and Mr. Vincent Pochin took his chance one day, thinking the doctor would be away long enough to permit him to break down the door of the strong-room. Mr. Pochin managed to do so, he found the remains of Mrs. Beharrell, gently packed them, and was proceeding with his plan to inter them properly in his own family vault at St. Hilary's . . . Then, presumably, he would have told the police."

"That's right. I intended to notify the police."

"Instead, he was disturbed by Dr. Beharrell. As Mr. Pochin reached the bedroom from which secret steps descend to the strong-room . . . a method originally used by the bankers for easy access to their valuables . . . Beharrell appeared and they fought. Mr. Pochin struck him, and the doctor either fainted, had a heart attack, or the blow was very severe. It was this scene which the vicar saw. He knew Mr. Pochin had struck the doctor down, and didn't wish to betray him personally."

"Very decent of him."

Pochin nodded appreciatively.

"So the vicar wrote to the police and left it to them. He wrote anonymously, but we didn't find it hard to trace it to him."

Littlejohn paused to fill and light his pipe again. You could have heard a pin drop in the little stuffy room. Outside, the square was dead silent as though brooding on the events of the past week.

"Having silenced Beharrell, Mr. Vincent went about his business with the remains of the woman he'd once loved. But it didn't end there. Mr. Hope of the *Red Lion* had a bone to pick with Dr. Beharrell. He suspected his wife was too friendly with the doctor."

"You're putting it mild, aren't you? And I don't want

any dirty linen washin' in public, either. I've my reputation to think of."

Hope might just not have been there. Everybody ignored him as he sat sulking in his chair, and waited for Littlejohn to go on. His wife, quite unperturbed, smiled at the Chief Constable, whose neck flushed red.

"Hope was in the bedroom waiting to have it out with the doctor, when, suddenly, he heard two people approaching. Mr. Pochin from behind the wardrobe, whence a secret door led down to the strong-room, and Dr. Beharrell, coming up the proper way. Hope got cold feet, hid in the wardrobe, and heard, but didn't see all the tragedy which followed."

Sam Pochin looked up and started to make notes as well.

"Hope will tell you he heard the scuffle which the vicar saw. He heard Pochin, whose voice he recognised, leave by the ordinary door with his burden. Then he heard other footsteps enter by the main bedroom door, stop briefly, and then go through the now open door to the stairs and vault. They then returned, there were sounds of blows and the moving of some heavy body, a smaller object fell down the stairs, the wardrobe with Hope still inside it, was put back in position. Then the intruder left. Hope beat a hasty retreat home."

Hope just grunted to show he neither agreed with his treatment nor disagreed with the story.

"We assume that after Pochin left, a newcomer, X, entered, saw the unconscious doctor, hurried to see what had been going on through the open secret door, descended, found the safe rifled . . . And then, he did a strange thing. He picked up a piece of lead piping left by a plumber who'd been doing a job a week or so earlier, climbed back in the room, and beat the doctor to death . . . Then he hid the body and fled."

Littlejohn turned to Macfarlane.

"And now, doctor. You have something to say?"

"Yes. I insist that the skeleton in the well was an anatomical specimen. I also repeat what I told you, that Beharrell once showed me the inside of the strong-room. He opened it with a key, on the spur of the moment, and

showed me inside. He hadn't a chance to move anything beforehand."

Littlejohn turned to Poehin.

"Mr. Vincent. In the course of your persistent enquiries, did you ever ask Dr. Macfarlane about the secret of the well and of the strong-room?"

Vincent blinked.

"Yes, I did. I left no stone unturned. I must confess that he told me exactly what he told you."

"And why did you persist in wanting to get in the strong-room, then?"

"I wanted to see for myself."

"In other words, you didn't believe Macfarlane?"

"Look here. I won't . . ."

"Please be quiet, doctor. Well, Mr. Vincent?"

"I don't like Macfarlane, so there . . . He may as well know. I don't like him. Beharrell didn't like him, either."

"Why?"

"I think he was a bit afraid of Macfarlane. I got that impression. I asked Beharrell why he didn't get rid of him, but he said it wasn't as easy as all that. I don't know what he meant and he wouldn't explain."

"I suggest Macfarlane was blackmailing Beharrell. That's why the old doctor didn't like him . . . or was even afraid of him. Don't interrupt, Macfarlane. You knew all the time what the strong-room contained. You often had the house to yourself and you must have been curious. It was said Beharrell held the only key of the room, but you surely had the chance of laying your hands on it and once you'd found out the contents, you began to apply the screw."

"It's a lie! I'll have you up for slander for this."

"You *had* to tell me what you'd already told Mr. Vincent. I might have asked him, and your story had to be consistent. But Poehin *did* get the remains from the vault and put them in his family tomb. They've been identified. You told me a lie because to confess that you knew the contents of the strong-room, would have betrayed your compounding a felony."

"I told the truth."

Macfarlane's eyes were shifty now and denied what

he was trying to prove by a show of bluff and bluster.

"How does an almost penniless young doctor suddenly blossom with an expensive car and a splash of money? It was blackmail. You pressed the old doctor hard."

"I deny it and you can't prove it."

"Dr. Beharrell's accounts will show it. That's someone else's business. I'm after Mr. X. He was seen by a rag-and-bone man who was there all the time the murder was going on. Tommy Drop was out collecting odds and ends when this drama was beginning. Foraging around in his usual dishonest way, he found the back cellar door of Bank House unlocked, and entered for what he could find. He was inside, helping himself, when footsteps started to come down the secret stairs. Tommy had entered after Pochin left for the last time and was disturbed by X, as he descended to find out what had been going on. Tommy hid. He saw X, watched him pick up the lead pipe, saw him return to the bedroom, and heard him batter Beharrell to death. Then X returned with Beharrell's body and dumped it on the top step of the stairs. As he did so, he let fall the weapon he'd used, the piece of lead piping. Before X could retrieve it, the doorbell rang, and he had to flee in haste without recovering the weapon. Tommy Drop gathered up all the loot he could lay his hands on, including the lead pipe, and fled as well. When the body of Beharrell was discovered he returned to blackmail the murderer, who told him to come back after dark. X then killed him. Later he moved the dead body to the square by the same route he followed when he shot Plumtree; through the empty church."

The Chief Constable was growing impatient.

"All this is pure theorising, Littlejohn. We want to know who X is. That's the point. Who's X? Do you know?"

"All this is fact, sir, as you'll find later in my report. As for X. It might have been any one of us here. Mr. Vincent Pochin, for instance. Or Dr. Macfarlane, whose finger-prints were found on the weapon."

Vincent Pochin and Macfarlane were both trying to speak at once and the doctor shouted down his reedy opponent.

"Nonsense. I'd often handled that piece of pipe. It was lying about there for a fortnight. I picked it up several times."

"Lucky for you, doctor, and lucky too that you were seen at the window of Bank House whilst Plumtree was being shot . . . As for you, Mr. Vincent, I agree, you were in hospital when the body of Tommy Drop was found, but not when he was killed. But you were in gaol when X tried to kill Plumtree . . . or rather pretended to kill him . . ."

"Pretended . . . ?" Two or three of them said it together.

"Yes. Someone wished to give Mr. Vincent a real alibi. You must all admit that he was suspect No. 1. He had Beharrell at his mercy on his own confession. Beharrell who'd killed the woman Pochin loved. He might easily have returned and finished the job in a rage."

"But I didn't."

"No. You didn't, sir."

"Who did it, then?"

"There was one man interested in Vincent Pochin. Vincent was said to be the weakling of the family. One who needed constant support, melancholic, neurotic, artistic. His brother Sam was his constant protector and friend. In fact, he ended by completely managing his brother's life and was a most powerful influence over him."

Sam sat up. He looked pained and surprised.

"Really, Littlejohn. What is a brother for but to stand beside his family in trouble? I do deny, however, that I treated Vincent like a child. He valued my advice, but he was a perfectly free agent."

"That's true."

Vincent answered like an obedient echo.

Littlejohn went on as though they hadn't spoken.

"Mr. Samuel Pochin always watched his brother closely. It was necessary, because others in the family had, in the past, behaved in eccentric ways and Mr. Vincent showed a tendency to do the same."

"Really, Littlejohn, this is unfair."

Sam looked full of reproach, but not anger.

"Unfair," said the echo.

"Mr. Sam followed his brother on the day he opened

Beharrell's strong-room. He knew all about Vincent's *idée fixe*, his obsession with the fate of Grace Bcharrell and his tendency to be unreasonable about all matters concerning it. He was anxious that he shouldn't land himself in gaol either for attacking Beharrell, or even attempted robbery. That day, he shadowed Vincent, was on his heels unseen, keeping, if you like *cave*, because he knew he couldn't stop Vincent in his insane search. He followed his brother in the house and heard or saw Vincent attack Beharrell and flee. He suddenly realised the consequences of Beharrell's recovery. With the remains of Grace gone, Beharrell was free. He could accuse Vincent of outright robbery, robbery with violence. And, if Vincent tried to explain his purpose in breaking in or excuse his attack, Beharrell could deny such a crazy tale. The police might even find the bones and lay the blame on Vincent, accuse *him* of the murder of so long ago. After all, he was locally spoken of as being slightly mad in certain quarters. The integrity and power of the local doctor would weigh heavily against Vincent. In a word, he might end in an asylum like others of his relatives."

Sam Pochin was no longer the mild, protective brother. His eyes glowed with a queer light, he drew back his upper lip and revealed his long canines, his hands twitched.

"Sam didn't find it difficult to finish the job. After all, he, too, had hated Bcharrell, because, in a quieter more intense way than Vincent, he, too, had loved Grace."

"Liar! You've not found the guilty one, so you're trying to put the blame on me. I'll see you broken for this, Littlejohn. The Chief Constable has heard it all. You've not a shred of proof."

"The murder of Tommy Drop falls into place. When I mentioned in hospital this afternoon that Vincent wasn't free from suspicion, or hadn't an alibi for Tommy's death, even if he was in hospital when the body was found, you made up your mind to clinch the matter. You didn't think I suspected you at all. You thought I still had my eye on your brother. So you went out and shot poor Plumtree. You didn't want to kill him, so you put a bullet in his leg. Just to give Vincent, safely in gaol, a cast-iron alibi."

"Liar again. I wasn't out when it happened. I was indoors, having my supper. When your colleague called, he found me in my dressing-gown and slippers, ending the meal which had taken over half an hour."

"But you'd just come in all the same."

"I hadn't. You can't substantiate that at all."

"My colleague told me when he came in with you that when he called for you, your hat was hanging in the hall of your flat. The inside hatband was wet with sweat. It would have been dry if you'd even been indoors ten minutes."

Cromwell arrived back and hurriedly consulted with Littlejohn. He was panting from his exertions.

"Also my colleague has just brought me this."

Littlejohn stretched out his hand and Cromwell placed in it an old-fashioned army revolver.

"This is your revolver, I believe. It has, I see, been re-loaded, but has recently been fired. The bullet extracted from the leg of Plumtree tallies with those fired by this weapon, although the usual tests haven't yet been made."

Samuel Pochin clawed across at the revolver, which Littlejohn put quietly in his own pocket.

"How did you get that? Give it to me. You've stolen it and are trying to eateli me out."

"Sergeant Cromwell has been across to search your house. He found it in what must be its usual place, I think; the writing-desk in the bedroom. You were so confident we didn't suspect you, that you took no precautions."

"You had no right to search my house. You'd no warrant. I shall take this up in the proper quarter."

Littlejohn rose.

"Meanwhile, you are under arrest, sir. Samuel Pochin, I . . ."

Sam wasn't even going to wait for a caution. Wild eyed, he charged for the door and fled into the square before anyone realised what had happened. Vincent tried to follow, but the Chief Constable held him back.

Outside, it was a race between Pochin and Littlejohn. Sam's legs seemed to fly like those of a well-trained athlete and he reached his own door well ahead of his opponent. The light shone over the fanlight and the frenzied man

had opened the door with his key and slammed it loudly before Littlejohn reached the steps. A frightened cat fled hither and thither trying to avoid the confusion. Cromwell and a policeman followed, and then the Chief Constable, who'd left Vincent in charge of the doctor, whose professional help he needed, too, for his brother's plight had left him in a state of collapse.

The door of the Pochin house was a stout one and resisted all assaults, and Littlejohn ordered the constable to smash a window with his truncheon. They needn't have bothered, and might just as well have rung the bell. The housekeeper let them in. An elderly woman, with her hair in a pigtail down her back and without her false teeth.

"Whatever's all this? As if we hadn't enough bother as it is."

"Where's Mr. Samuel?"

"He's in the bathroom making awful moanin' noises. I can't get in to him. The door's locked. I'm just on my way for the doctor."

They rushed past her and soon heard the sounds of the soft moaning themselves. They forced the bathroom door. Sam had cut his throat with his razor.

And that was the end of it. Sam left no confession in writing, but he had told his mother how and why he'd killed Beharrell. It almost tallied with Littlejohn's deductions.

"He was always mad about Vincent, you see. Vincent was a sickly boy and Sam lavished on him the affection he might have shown for his own son, if he'd been fortunate enough to have one. The only trouble was, that after Vincent grew better and able to look after himself, it still went on and on . . . I never wanted either of them to marry. Their father . . . their uncle Willie . . . I've had enough. Sam was always a good man, only the family blood was in him. He told me all he'd done. He seemed to need somebody to confess to, although he thought it was right because he'd protected Vincent from trouble again. It was always the same . . . I promised that unless someone else looked like being blamed, I'd keep his secret. But he never told me about killing Watson. That's just it. The first affair must

have driven him over the line. Well . . . I'm glad it's over and he's in God's peace. You might think it's very wrong of me . . . But I've had enough."

After his brother's domination ended and the formalities of the Upper Square horrors were over, Vincent Pochin seemed to take on a new lease of life. He took his mother to Switzerland for a holiday and they both returned looking much better, although Mrs. Pochin curtailed the holiday by a week or so and brought Vincent home. Otherwise, he looked like getting himself engaged to a wealthy young widow who was staying at their hotel in Vitznau.

Plumtree soon returned to the bosom of his family. They, too, were changed. His wife regretted bitterly those nights when she used to fall asleep and leave him telling his adventures unheard and in the dark. "What would I 'ave done if he'd been took?" she said when he was declared out of danger as soon as they examined him in hospital. And whilst he was convalescent in bed at home, the whole family would gather round and listen to his full account of the Beharrell crime. Even Roland, the clever one who was going to be a scientist—whatever he meant by that—remained humble and uncritical. As the climax drew near, however, Plumtree's voice would trail away, and he would fall asleep, exhausted by his own eloquence.

Littlejohn and Cromwell, returning to London, saw Hope and his wife on the train. The unhappy pair were still not on speaking terms but, with the Riviera in sight, Hope had hopes.

